



**D S KANE**

**SWIFT  
SHADOW**

**BOOK 3 IN THE *SPIES LIE* SERIES**

*Bloodridge*, Book 1 in the Spies Lie Series:

“A globe-trotting spy thriller dense with  
intriguing insider's knowledge.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

# **SWIFTSHADOW**

**BOOK 3 IN THE SPIES LIE SERIES**

**D. S. KANE**

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## **Disclaimer**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events depicted here are the work of the author's mind. Most but not all of the places are real.

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For Michael and Elliot,  
brothers in arms.

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# Contents

## PART I

CHAPTER 1

## TWO YEARS LATER

CHAPTER 2 • CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4 • CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6 • CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8 • CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10 • CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12

## PART II

CHAPTER 13 • CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15 • CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17 • CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19 • CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21 • CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23 • CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25 • CHAPTER 26

## PART III

CHAPTER 27 • CHAPTER 28  
CHAPTER 29 • CHAPTER 30  
CHAPTER 31 • CHAPTER 32  
CHAPTER 33 • CHAPTER 34  
CHAPTER 35 • CHAPTER 36  
CHAPTER 37 • CHAPTER 38  
CHAPTER 39 • CHAPTER 40

## PART IV

CHAPTER 41 • CHAPTER 42  
CHAPTER 43 • CHAPTER 44

*Appendix A – Glossary*

*Appendix B – Character List*  
*for the Spies Lie series (alphabetical)*

[Appendix C](#)

[Appendix D](#)

[Appendix E](#)

[About the Author](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

“Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

—George Orwell,  
“Politics and the English Language”, 1946

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# PART I

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# CHAPTER 1

*September 13, 6:16 p.m.*  
*Cassandra Sashakovich's apartment,*  
*Number 408, 219 F Street NW,*  
*Washington, DC*

Cassandra Sashakovich hummed “Candy Man,” a John Hurt delta blues tune, as she opened the door and pulled her spinner suitcase into her studio apartment. The trip home from Tel Aviv had taken an entire day. She prepared for another round of jet-lag. Travel was exciting but the aftermath was always a pain. She dragged her spinner suitcase inside and closed the door, and set the stack of mail she’d retrieved from the lobby mailbox on the table.

Despite their best efforts, two weeks performing an econometric study for startups in Herzliyya had left her exhausted. *Such is the life of a management consultant.* Two of the startups needed help setting up their venture capital relationships, and she coached them through their initial meetings. The other startup had encountered serious financial problems and run out of cash. She’d worked with the investors to obtain a third and final round of financing, then informed them that unless they could complete their prototype before the cash ran out, they’d be dead and gone.

She admired the tan Israel had put on her forearms. A good match for her brown eyes. But, as she passed the mirror, she saw how bedraggled she looked. Her long, chestnut hair stuck to her ears and heart-shaped face.

In the fridge, she found the smell of science experiments gone bad. She slammed its door shut, opting for a glass of tap water instead. The stack of mail was thick. She sat and ripped open the first three envelopes, all bills.

The final letter in the stack came from her fiancé, serving a tour in Afghanistan. *Evan!* She smiled as she ripped the envelope. She dropped

onto the couch and read the letter three times. It was over two weeks old. It probably arrived the day she'd left. Its final sentence glared at her: "Tomorrow we'll be clearing a dangerous spot, but don't worry. I'll be okay. I always am."

This was a lie. He'd recently experienced several near misses, dramatic escapes, and one of his fellow soldiers had died rescuing him in combat.

They'd been engaged since his second tour, soon after she met him. When he had told her he wanted to sign up for another tour, she'd lost her temper and told him she wanted to attend their wedding, not his funeral. They'd argued for hours, but in the end, he'd promised this would be his last tour. She said a prayer for Evan.

She undressed and went to bed, unable to sleep as she worried about him. She dreamed of an explosion with Evan at its center, and woke up drenched.

To take her mind off Evan's letter and her fears, she thought of her next assignment. Tomorrow, she'd be expected at the Washington DC satellite office of Brewster Jennings, an econometric consulting firm headquartered in Boston. She thought of the report she was scheduled to deliver on the Israeli startups, and worried about how jet lag might affect her performance. It took hours before she drifted back into a dreamless sleep.

She saw the answering machine message light blinking the following morning as she was pouring herself a cup of coffee. Dressed and ready to leave the apartment, she pressed the machine's buttons and heard the voice of Evan's mother.

"Cassandra, it's Linda. I don't know what to tell you. I guess it's best if I just say it. Evan died sometime last week. They won't tell me how or where, but his body is on its way home. If you can, his funeral is the day after tomorrow." The message had arrived yesterday just before she'd unlocked her apartment door. Her legs buckled and she fell to the floor. *Evan!* She reached for his letter and held it to her chest. She felt as if half her heart had been ripped away. *How could this happen? What should I do now? I have to travel to his home, to see Linda, to be there with her.* She rose, but before she could move, she fell to her knees again, bawling, a flood of tears washing the makeup from her face.

She bought a black dress and called her manager, saying she'd be away for two more days. She arrived in Lexington, Virginia, just in time to see Evan put under the ground.

Under a gray drizzle, she stood next to Linda as the casket scraped its way down. She listened as an Army major told Linda that Evan died when an IED blew apart the vehicle carrying him and three others. The image of his mother accepting the folded flag that had covered Evan's coffin would remain seared forever in Cassie's memory as the ultimate cost of war.

She was utterly devastated on the drive to Linda's home for the wake. It was long after dark when she parked her car in her apartment's garage. Once more home, anger and grief welled up irresistibly within her. The apartment seemed to close around her. She decided impulsively to visit a bar, intending to drown her sorrows. It was unlike her to drink. And she'd never let herself get drunk before.

But when she woke up the next morning, the light bursting through her eyes left her with the solid pain of a hangover.

Her hand was atop a stranger's hairy thigh. Her eyes darted to the sight of a naked, snoring man she didn't remember meeting. But there he was, an uninvited guest in her bed.

She'd gasped, then shuddered. With short, brown hair and an athletic build, she guessed he'd looked like Evan in the dark bar. What had she done? She didn't even know his name.

Her head felt like her brain was stuffed into a skull that was way too small. Her tongue felt like a bale of hay.

When the man rolled toward her, she was greeted by the smell of alcohol on his putrid morning breath. Then she saw the used condom on the bed between them. Cassie gagged, ran to the bathroom and threw up.

The naked stranger walked into the bathroom and smiled. "Was I that bad?"

She felt only revulsion at the sight of him. "Please go. Now."

He did just that, out the door in less than two minutes, stuffing himself into his pants as she slammed the door on him.

A week after his burial, Evan's last letter arrived, containing the photo of him in his uniform, smiling, leaning against a Humvee.

She decided she'd take the photo with her wherever she traveled.

*I want my life back, my dreams back.* But she knew this wasn't

possible. Instead, she'd have to find a way to move ahead. She needed new hopes and dreams, a new future.

*Late!* She'd have to hurry to work at Brewster Jennings. As she pulled the toothbrush from its holder, her cell buzzed, echoing the pounding from her hangover. The caller ID was blocked. She ignored the throbbing and answered. "Cassandra Sashakovich."

"Ms. Sashakovich, how would you like to help your government?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Mark McDougal. You've been recommended for an opening in my department."

She balked at his Midwestern twang. "I already have a job."

"Yes, and we know you, from your econometric forecasts and your work with startups in China and Israel. Brewster Jennings was kind enough to send them on to us. We could use another bright PhD like you."

Someone unnamed had recommended her for something unknown. But who, and for what? Maybe this would be the opportunity that gave her a fresh start. "Fed, huh? Which department?"

"National intelligence. One of the smaller services. If we hire you, you'd report to me. Interested?"

**TWO YEARS LATER**

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## CHAPTER 2

*May 28, 9:22 p.m.  
Jinnah International Airport,  
Karachi, Pakistan*

It was to be a short trip, but the task was so urgent Mr. McDougal hadn't given her time to pack properly.

From the moment Cassandra Sashakovich's flight touched down, the clock was running. She'd trotted off the plane, dressed in a dark gray sari and a black head scarf. She managed her way through customs, dragging her suitcase and carrying her passport as a Pakistani national named Chandra Paklorri. She'd been in the region so many times her skin was suntanned to the color of a native.

The customs official scanned the passport declaring her a local. "Welcome home."

She barely nodded, gliding through the airport's exit into a taxi, and on to the entrance of the Karachi Marriott at Abdullah Haroon Road. From her purse, she exchanged passports, and was now "Chrissie Card, Management Consultant, Brewster Jennings and Associates," an ENR 500 engineering consulting firm headquartered in Boston. She pulled off the headscarf, exposing her long chestnut-brown hair as she marched to the front desk.

Check-in took less than ten minutes, but even that was time on the clock. By the time she tipped the valet and closed her door, she had less than two hours remaining.

*What was so urgent that the agency couldn't plan this better?* She sighed, setting up her notebook computer. Her suitcase remained unopened, for use after her mission was complete, or in case she failed.

But she'd never failed. Not yet, anyway.

She set up her wireless connection and hacked into the hotel's Internet

connection so there'd be no trace of her ever having been a hotel customer. Then she side-loaded into the main server of the Bank of Trade and backdoored, shifting IDs and passwords until she was within the transaction server for the bank's deposits.

She took a deep breath. Halfway there now, but only eight minutes remaining before the bank's time clock cycled into tomorrow, locking her out from the database and keeping her from wiping away her presence.

Cassie searched for the account Mark McDougal had told her to find. There was never anything written down, and she'd barely had time to memorize her orders and her washed identity. Now, she entered into the transaction pool and, finally, found the specific records she sought. She tried deleting the first one. Keyed several passwords but none worked.

Three minutes left. She cursed in several languages and stopped to think. Maybe if she used the name of the bank officer who'd authorized the transfers? She keyed "Syed\_Ali\_Bosfara," banged the Enter key, and was rewarded. Deleted the first transaction. But there were seventeen of them and only fifty-two seconds remaining. Not long enough to get to each of them individually. Cassie tried eliminating all the entries as a group. No good, the system wouldn't permit group deletions. Seven seconds left.

Time to backtrace her steps and wipe away all trace of her. She could type faster than any of the other hackers from the intelligence service. It was one of the skills that had gotten her through the economics PhD program at Stanford. But, tonight, her speed might not be enough. She finished keying and slammed the Enter key for the last time. The system sat without responding as she counted down the seconds. Her wristwatch alarm buzzed.

She terminated the wireless connection as fast as she could. But she knew it wasn't good enough. Less than a second later, the system returned an error message: "Time Expired. Day Cycle In Progress."

*Damn!* She'd been locked out before her visit could be expunged. When the backup cycle started its second stage, it would record a second copy off-site, and then she would be truly screwed. *Only one way to fix this and all I have left is twenty-nine minutes.*

Cassie rose from the desk chair and packed her notebook into its case. She opened the suitcase. It was going to be a long night, and for the first time since she'd been hired as an NOC, or "non-official cover," she would



have to do work she feared. NOC's were never acknowledged by her agency.

She re-dressed in black spandex clothing treated with a Kevlar formulation. Almost bulletproof. She stuffed her notebook computer and her tools within her backpack along with her exit clothing and alternate identities, and dropped the backpack into the suitcase. She left the room. *I'm ready.*

Cassie took the stairs down to Abdullah Haroon Road, removed the backpack from the suitcase and dropped the suitcase in one of the trash containers. She donned the backpack and attached the notebook computer case to the backpack with Velcro fasteners.

The streets were dark and silent. She pulled her map from one of the backpack's zippered pockets. It was a long walk to the Bank of Trade's headquarters building at Lakhani Centre, on I. I. Chundrigar Road. She sprinted. Her training at the CIA's training facility known as "The Farm" included running at top speed for over two miles.

She had less than ten minutes until the bank's offsite backup cycle began. *Hurry!*

When she reached the row of bank buildings, Cassie slowed to a stroll and entered the alleyway between the banking operations building and the headquarters building. She examined the map McDougal had packed and found the spot he'd marked. A series of glass windows ran along the ground level. She took the glass cutter and suction cup from the backpack and crafted an entrance through the basement window. Inside, she placed packets of C-6 explosive against the load-bearing walls, where they would cause the greatest damage. She spread a pool of the incendiary liquid on the floor under the computers. She set the timer and rushed out, back onto the street.

At this time of night, no cars passed and no people walked the streets. At five-foot-six and one-hundred-twenty pounds, she was thin enough that her black clothing made her almost invisible as she ran through the night.

Several buildings away loomed the head office of the National Bank of Pakistan. She blended into the darkness in the building's side alleyway and entered the stately building by slicing through its basement window. The memory of a blues tune, "St. James Infirmary," floated through her head, distracting her, and she forced herself to focus. Her watch displayed the

urgency. *Four minutes left.*

In the basement she traced the location of the bank's CAT-5 network lines and opened her notebook case. In less than a minute she'd hacked into their database and transaction pools. She found the funds transfers she'd failed to delete before they'd been sent through to the national clearing center, and destroyed them all.

As she ran from the building, the explosion from the Bank of Trade's basement threw flames into the sky. The wrist alarm buzzed. *Time's up. But, I'm finished.*

*Get away now, but don't run.* She walked a few blocks until she found a convenient dark alleyway. Cassie stripped off the spandex and re-dressed in Western clothing. The tool kit and the alternate identities she'd already used went into a trash bin that was nearly full and ready for pickup.

She kept the passport for "Chrissie Card," packing it into a hidden pocket in her purse and extracted a new one, for "Darla Kidon," a diplomatic attachée for the Canadian Embassy. That old one would yet prove useful. She stuffed the new passport into the purse and placed the purse in her backpack.

Cassie, now "Darla," reached into her backpack and pulled out a tiny glass vial. She twisted the top of the vial, dropped it into the trash bin, and walked away. It would take several minutes for the vial's contents to destroy everything in the bin.

No longer rushed, her escape from Karachi was her new priority as she walked to the Sheraton on Club Road. Cassie entered the hotel from the rear and took the stairs to its basement.

*One last time, find a wireless connection for my notebook.* Before McDougal had rushed her to Karachi, she'd been scheduled to work an assignment in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She confirmed her seat on the Air France flight to Riyadh at 6 a.m.

She wiped the contents of all the non-hidden folders in the notebook's hard disk and then took the elevator to one of the upper floors, to the snack machine vestibule. *Safest place to spend the early morning hours.* Cassie chewed candy bars until 4 a.m., then took the elevator to the lobby. The quiet stillness of early morning slowed her heartbeat. *It's over.*

On the line with other business executives waiting for taxis to the airport, she pulled Evan's photo from the backpack. A teardrop fell onto her

sleeve. *I wish he was still alive.* She let her mind drift back to their lives before things blew apart and he somehow morphed into the guitar she'd bought after his death. *Funny thought.*

For Cassandra Sashakovich, it was just another day in the life.

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## CHAPTER 3

*June 3, 6:58 p.m.  
Room 307, third floor,  
Golden Tulip Andalusia Hotel,  
Olaya Street, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

Cassie had flown direct from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia five days ago, her cover once again Chrissie Card, an econometric consultant. Early this morning, she'd delivered the report she'd written on the growth in demand for electricity. Now, after bidding her client farewell, she'd returned to her hotel room and packed for the early morning flight back to Boston and the Brewster Jennings satellite office in Washington the following morning.

The Minister of Public Utilities called with a question on population dynamics, and she held the landline receiver to her ear. "Yes, Minister. I'll find out for you and contact you after I return to our office back home. Thanks, and goodnight."

Her last night in this barren place. One more evening suffering the overpowering street-side scents trapped in her hair. Her overactive sense of smell was overwhelmed with the stench of nearby oil refineries, the aromas of food vendors, and the stink of rancid camel dung. She wondered why she found the intense street odors so offensive, while the whiffs of exotic food were so satisfying.

Cassie had played her recycled "Chrissie Card" cover during the daylight hours and hacked into bank computers at night from her hotel room.

She ordered dinner from room service in perfect Arabic. The Defense Language Institute in Monterey had been anything but West Coast laid back. Classes in Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, Dari, Farsi, and their corresponding Middle Eastern cultures two years ago had left her fluent, able to operate

nearly unseen among the locals.

She counted the hours before she left for America as she searched the room-service menu. Eating dinner in her hotel room would save her time and was almost as good as Baalbek, her favorite restaurant on Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Road. Without a client to accompany her, she had no choice. Women didn't venture out at night alone here.

This assignment was more benign than the previous one, in Karachi. Things there had gotten complicated. Burning down two buildings in the financial district had made headline news.

In comparison, this was a breeze. Sixty million US dollars equivalent routed from Islamic extremist bank accounts back to the bank of her agency; four separate hacks, each complex but not terribly difficult..

Her reward, excellent food, would soon come through the door. She looked forward to the savory pigeon soup with its musky, gamey chicken nada flavor it had taken months getting used to. Now, she loved its symphony of flavors. She licked her lips, anticipating the *bastia*, a powdered-sugar-crusting pastry stuffed with savory cinnamon-flavored meat.

She reached for her attaché case and dug through her papers. She was jarred to see Evan's photograph. Her heart ached for her dead lover. *It's exactly two years tonight. Done with him. He's haunted me long enough. Damn him for wanting to fight.* She tore the photo into pieces.

A single tear escaped. Just one.

There was a knock on her door. She peered through the peephole. A tall man dressed in a white jacket waited outside with a cart carrying her dinner. She opened the door, took a deep breath of the aromas of spices and smiled.

The attractive olive-skinned man wheeled her dinner to the table. She found him staring at her and gulped, examining the man in front of her more closely. Was he a threat? Something didn't feel right.

She handed him a small stack of bills, cocked her head and spoke in Arabic. "Thanks. You can go now."

His gaze shifted away from her, but then he seemed to reconsider. He reached out and touched her arm. Alarmed, she faced him, standing crouched to defend herself.

"Swiftshadow." Although he barely whispered, she gasped audibly and

sank back into her seat.

“What did you say?” she whispered back. Alarm bells shrieked in her head. He knew her agency call sign.

“I am a NOC. My name is Abdul Hassain.” He was claiming he was an asset of her intelligence service, with “non-official cover.” He tilted his head and his eyes shifted down. “I have urgent material for you to deliver to the agency. Your call sign. I was given that to identify myself as your legitimate contact.”

Her throat was suddenly dry. It hurt to swallow. Her mind raced on without focus. *Who the hell is he? How can he know something no one knows unless told by my handler? Calling the agency to find out if he’s legitimate will divulge more than just my cover. Is he someone and is this something I should attend to? What should I do?*

*I’m not trained as a courier. I’m an economist, a banker, and a hacker. I’ve had negligible training in self-defense or situational analysis. What if he isn’t who he claims, and carries a handgun? I’ve had minimal training in weapons and close-quarters combat. Only had two weeks at Camp Cleary. Most of my training was at The Farm, and that was in computer hacking and counter-surveillance. Totally useless here.*

*I’m unprepared to analyze this situation.* She tried to quiet her Uncle Misha’s voice in her head telling her not to do this. *Not safe. I don’t have access to the diplomatic pouch without permanently blowing my cover. If I take anything from him, it would have to go through customs with me.*

*But what if his intel is critical? What he wants to pass to me must be important if he’s broken protocol. Does my country need me to take this risk?*

*Take a deep breath. Refocus.*

*No. I can’t take the intel.*

Her attaché case sat open on the desk. In clear view, pieces of Evan’s ripped photo. Worse, work papers peeked from under the photo. He spoke English, so it was likely he could read it as well. “Just a sec.”

He nodded.

She walked to the case. The report under the photo was her “Forecast of Electricity Demand,” just completed for the Saudi government, with its twelve pages of text, graphs, and tables of statistics. It was her cover assignment. The banner of the report showed the contact information for

her Chrissie Card cover identity.

But what she most needed to hide from Abdul was a folder with her notes, peeking out from the end of the case. Its label was visible: “Muslim Extremist Bank Account Data.” It contained the locations, names, account numbers, and the associated SWIFT codes for the banks that housed accounts of Muslim extremists. Cassie’s copy of the code manual, *Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication*, based in Belgium, would be suspicious to anyone familiar with her cover assignment, which had nothing to do with banking or computer hacking.

The left half of Evan’s face grinned back from one of the torn photo’s pieces. Another piece bore a word of his printed message pledging his love. She almost flinched. Another deep breath to refocus.

*Abdul can’t see any of this.* She slammed the lid closed on the attaché case, latched it.

Cassie turned and found Abdul inches away. She jolted, startled, and then resettled herself. Shook her head. “I won’t act as your courier. When I return to Washington, I’ll tell my handler to send a courier.”

Abdul frowned. “Then at least we can enjoy ourselves before I leave.” He moved aggressively toward her. She moved back.

“Not interested.”

He was taller and heavier than her, and moved as fast as a cat. Before she could counter his move, he was holding her with one arm as he ripped her blouse off with the other.

He trapped her arms with one large hand. Desperate, she sank her teeth into his upper arm as deep as she could, gripping him, her jaw rigid as he yelled. She didn’t let up.

Abdul hit her in the face with his fist and her world went black.

She saw the laughing face of Uncle Misha telling her, “You’re beyond your depth. Tonight you die!”

Now, she rocked back into contact with the world and felt hands probing her body.

Fully conscious, naked, she was under Abdul’s body. Her right cheek burned where he’d beaten her into unconsciousness. His heavy body anchored her, controlled her. She tried to shift her head and saw the hairs on the hand that held a knife against her throat as he pumped his body deep into her.

Through the searing pain, she couldn't tell if wetness underneath was her blood on the sheets, but then the odors hit her. The sickening street smells from the open window and spicy odor of the dinner trays mingled with the tangy odor of body fluids seeping from inside her into a sickening repulsive mélange. Not the coppery odor of blood. Sex.

She gagged but he didn't seem to notice. Outrage mingled with shame, overshadowing the fear she'd felt.

He squeezed her tiny breasts no bigger than a boy's, breasts Evan had loved. Blind fury overwhelmed the pain between her legs. She wanted to make him suffer and screamed as loud as she could.

Abdul clamped a hand atop her mouth. Cassie struggled but Abdul tightened the knife against her neck. She could feel her blood drip down her neck from the shallow cut. "Silence, or you die right now."

She stopped yelling.

"That's right, don't move. You—American women—you're meant to submit. It will be easier for you if you do."

*Submit? Crap!* She did resist, her scream muffled by his hand. She tried to deny the reality of being raped, but each pummel of her body was an affront, and her screams melted into crying.

"Submit, Cassandra or I will kill you now instead of later."

*He knows my real name!* She forced herself to deal with the obvious: *He wasn't sent by the agency. This isn't just a rape. Shit! Cover's blown. He's here to murder me.*

She felt her assassin's body reach deep inside her, penetrating her, just as he soon would with his knife. She forced herself to concentrate. She had no idea who created this situation or why, but the list of people wanting her dead was growing ever longer. Her work for the agency left every terror group with fewer resources as she stole their money.

She'd let death into her hotel room.

She assessed her situation: Hassain was six feet tall, muscled and heavy. At five-feet-six and about one-hundred-twenty pounds, Cassie was wiry but not strong. No match for her assassin. A tiny voice that sounded like she'd imagined her Uncle Misha's did, screamed inside her head, *you idiot! You've no way to fix this.*

Or did she? She thought about Evan's death in Iraq. For so long she'd wanted to die instead of living without him. But now, when death faced her



now, she chose life. *How to fix this?*

It was her rapist or her.

*I need a plan to defend my life.* There was none apparent. The voice in her head spoke again: *Use your body as a weapon to buy yourself time.*

*Rape is about control.* She needed time to craft a plan. She let out a sigh and then closed her eyes tight, forcing her body to go as limp as a rag doll. No further resistance at all from her.

She'd never killed anyone before, but tonight she'd have to. *Focus!*

She opened her eyes to slits and looked for a weapon. The nightstand held an alarm clock, too light to inflict damage. She saw a telephone, a hotel pen, and a glass half-filled with diet soda. She wished for something sharp or heavy, like the chef's knife from her apartment back in DC. Cassie thought about using the pen to pierce his temple, but it was too flimsy. Its point might bend or snap rather than penetrate his skull.

The plan formed in her head. To distract him, she tightened her thighs as hard as she could. *Keep him from moving and provide me with a better point of balance.* But holding him so tight and drawing him deeper inside her triggered his spasm into orgasm. As he ejaculated into her, Abdul momentarily loosened his hold. It was the break she needed. In one fast movement she grabbed the phone's base and slammed it hard against his left temple. His eyes bulged, then closed. The knife fell from his hand, bouncing onto the carpet.

She squeezed out from under him and wrapped the twelve-foot-long cord around his neck. *Pull it tight. Tighter!*

His eyes popped open. She saw him reach for the knife and smashed his nose flat with the palm of her hand.

He screamed as he stepped back, blood streaming down his face. In less than a second, he recovered and cornered her, using one hand to loosen the phone cord from his neck.

Cassie kicked him in the head and then connected a second time, her bare foot hitting him hard in the crotch.

Abdul doubled over. His arm swept low, grabbing the knife from the carpet and hissing as in one swift move he swung it into her and opened a gash in her shoulder. As she backed away, he moved the knife to cut the phone cord.

She jumped on him, grabbed the hand he used to hold the knife and bit

into it hard as she could. Her jaw locked onto him while he smashed her head several times, but the knife dropped and bounced under the bed.

*Now I see the opening!* Cassie ripped the other end of the phone cord from the wall and swung its base over the bathroom door. She ducked inside, closed the door with him outside, pulling the thin cable tight over the top of the door. Wrapped its loose end around her waist. Dropped hard onto the floor, hoisting his body by the neck. She knew his toes were off the ground, with her hands gripping the bottom of the door. *No time to think.*

She was stretched out upside down, every muscle tense for what seemed like hours, until he stopped struggling.

She dropped to the floor and unwrapped herself. Crawling around the door, she checked him for a pulse. Abdul was most definitely dead. As she let his body down, she heard his bowels open. She tried to ignore the odor, and knew she needed to get away from his corpse fast, before she vomited.

She looked down and saw the condom stuck halfway inside her. Why had he bothered? But then she realized since he was here not to rape her but to execute her, the murder would be investigated. “Condom” equaled “no DNA evidence.” Cassie pulled it from her. Its tip had ripped open. She went to the bathroom and wiped away the white fluid dripping from her. She sighed and looked in the mirror. Blood seeped from her neck, more from her shoulder. It was just clotting. Now she felt pain.

She had killed a man. Couldn't focus. Her knees buckled and she hit the floor, gasping. Scenes flowed through her head, aromas and emotions traveled with them. The room-service foods versus Abdul's stench. The odor her own body emitted during the rape, the stink from the street outside. Abdul's face when he entered her room versus Evan's destroyed photo. It was too much; she gasped for breath.

Mark McDougal, her boss and handler had told her, “We haven't hired you for black ops, just technical assignments. You'll never kill anyone. You'll just be a hacker.” The irony of her situation was obvious to her. She staggered, empty and cold, still perspiring. The voice in her head jabbered, barging unwanted thoughts into her mind. Ugly thoughts. *In Saudi Arabia, they behead murderers.* Cassie imagined herself, hands bound behind her back, body laid down with her head locked into the stone block for decapitation in public view at “Chop Chop Square.” Her throat went dry. Panic threaded out from her core. It took all her self-restraint to choke back

tears. She fell back to the floor, the room going tilt-a-whirl.

The cold tile floor of the bathroom returned the world to something she could deal with.

*I must flee. Time is my greatest enemy. What to do first? How to prepare?* Cassie tried to remember what she'd learned at The Farm, the spy school used by all the secret police forces of the United States. She'd been given just basic training, nothing more. A tad of self-defense, a bit about handguns and covert tradecraft, but because she'd not be used for black operations, the focus was more on covert counter-surveillance than hard-core combat. *I wish I'd paid closer attention.*

But the basic hand-to-hand combat she'd learned there had just saved her life. Surely, the other tactics she'd need tonight were somewhere within her.

Didn't work. Her mind swirled. *Leave right now!. No, that would be a mistake. What if my assassin has coworkers in the hotel, watching, waiting for me?*

She needed a plan. *Best to determine his orders. Look for clues. Why did this happen?* She used a dry-cleaning bag from her closet to keep her fingerprints and DNA from contaminating the objects she searched. His clothing contained a note, written in Arabic. Scribbled there was someone's or some location's initials and phone number. A local number: 966 1 405-5811. His pockets held a new cell phone—battery fully charged—but no list of recent calls and no address book.

*Maybe he was an amateur. A professional would have memorized the number. And not even carry a blank cell phone. Pay phones for an assassin.* She turned the phone around in her hand, examining its many features. The record function was unique and it had enough RAM to retain about an hour at the density of human conversation. In fact, she found it was set at “voice recording” density, and ready to record. What would he have needed to record? No files were already recorded, and it wasn't turned on, so he hadn't started recording her during her rape.

Cassie took her cell phone from her attaché case and entered the phone number and initials where she could save them for later investigation. She placed the note and his cell phone in the plastic bag and dropped it in her attaché case. *I must learn who the phone number belongs to. And whose initials those are.* She'd completed hacking into the Houmaz brothers' bank

accounts and removed a few million USD equivalent from them earlier that afternoon. They weren't the only major Middle East Islamic extremist group she'd hacked recently. The agency had her grift from Hamas, Hezbollah, Fatah, and the Muslim Brotherhood as well. But she stole the most, and most often, from the Houmaz accounts.

For sure they wanted her dead, but enough to purchase trackers and an assassin with all the ensuing costs?

Her past contacts with Tariq and Pesi Houmaz had never been in person. Two months ago, she had hacked into their bank accounts and moved all the cash—tens of millions of dollars—to a friendly government's current account. But if it was only the money she'd stolen, wouldn't they have just cut off her hands? That was the traditional punishment for thieves.

Even more important, had someone at her agency sold her out? Was there a mole? Almost as fast as she thought of the questions, the answer to the last one came. Damn. Of course there was. Who?

There were no easy answers. If she survived this night, she might have the luxury of finding them. Still hyperventilating, Cassie forced herself to sit next to the assassin's corpse on the floor and whispered a mantra: "Regain focus. Be calm. Regain focus. Be calm."

The hotel's alarm clock read 12:32 a.m. She took a deep breath and the lessons she'd been taught returned.

*I have to get rid of the corpse to give me time to get out of the country.* Cassie rose and walked around the room. *Where can I hide him?*

All the odors from her battle attacked her like battering rams. Their stench overwhelmed her. She ran to the bathroom, opened the toilet seat and threw up, heaving until her gut ached, leaving her stomach dry and empty. *I have to get rid of these odors to enable myself to concentrate.* Cassie turned up the air conditioning and headed to the bathroom.

She hurried to the shower, feeling soiled and used, scrubbing her body raw.

While she pulled on a sweater and jeans from the tiny clothes closet by the bathroom, every lesson came back to her, as if she sat in class at The Farm. *What to do if you're forced to kill someone while you're on foreign soil.*

*Rule One: To buy time, hide the corpse and take all documentation identifying it.* She took all of Abdul's possessions and stuffed them in her

pants pocket. There was sufficient toilet paper to wipe the excrement from Abdul. She rolled his body into the top bed sheet and used the sheet to drag the corpse over the carpet. Abdul was every bit as heavy as he looked. Perspiration dripped from her. Cassie left his corpse by the room's door. She dressed and removed her tool case from her attaché.

*I have to assume Abdul has accomplices waiting somewhere in the hotel.*

Holding Abdul's knife in her hand, Cassie took a deep breath to steady herself, then cracked the door. It felt as if her heart was about to explode. She peeked out to see if anyone waited outside.

No one there. It was quiet. She stepped into the hallway and locked her room door behind her. Videocams were mounted in the most obvious places and she could easily avoid them. She explored the hall until she found the door to the floor's supply room. It was locked, as expected.

Cassie removed a bump-key lock pick from her tool case to force the door open with a blow from the back end of Abdul's knife. The first blow knocked the pick out of her hand and sent it skittering across the carpet. She tried again but her unsteady hands missed the pick entirely. *Take a deep breath and try once more.* This time, she felt the lock pop.

Just inside the door a broomstick without a broom head caught her eye. The top of its neck was sharpened to a point. *Odd.* She stared at it, trying to decipher if her assassin had placed it there. Further inside, she found supplies on shelves, and linen too. She closed the door but not to the point where the latch caught. She walked back to her hotel room and fetched the corpse. Taking a deep breath to quell her fear that her luck might change at any second, she used the bed sheet to drag his body from her room, down the hall, and into the supply cabinet.

This late at night, Riyadh was silent beyond the noises she made dragging Abdul. She was grateful no one on her floor of the hotel opened a door. *Six doors down to the linen supply cabinet. Open the door.*

She pulled the sheets off the bottom shelf and stuffed him in. *Now tidy up.* She placed the other sheets on top and around him, until it looked as if the staff had done a poor job of straightening the shelf. *Oh, and a sheet to make up my own bed.*

Cassie hoped she'd be gone from the country before the hotel staff found the corpse. Her hands were drenched in sweat as she opened her door.

*I've left DNA evidence behind.*

*Rule Two: Assemble a false identity and escape looking for all the world like a local.* Cassie sprinted back to her room. She rummaged through the false bottom of her attaché case and found several sets of identification papers for a Saudi who looked remarkably like her, including passports and visas. She placed them in a handy pocket to show if demanded by the local authorities. Then she emptied the attaché case of all identification papers—including her Electricity Demand Forecast and the Islamic extremist bank account list—along with anything essential for her journey to safety. She used a large paperclip to bind the documents together, pulled a roll of Scotch tape from her attaché case, and taped the documents to her belly under her blouse. *Now to appear like a local.* She donned the black *abaya* and *boshiya* she wore when in public to cover her Western clothes. Last, she pulled her satellite phone from the case and stuffed it into the front pocket of her slacks. Cassie checked her wristwatch: 2:06 a.m.

She peeked into the hallway. *Best to get the hell out of here as fast as I can. Slip out and race down the hall to the fire stairs.* Just before she opened the door to the stairwell, a man wearing a business suit appeared behind her, his reflection staring at her in the door's small window. He held a two-way radio in his left hand, stuck against his ear. He shouted in Arabic, "Stop!" and ran toward her. Hotel security at best. At worst, one of her assassin's associates.

She popped the door and fled down the stairs. Cassie could hear him calling the hotel's security center as he pounded down the stairs right behind her. She sped toward the first-floor door at the service exit. Shit. Her plan to escape was unraveling.

As she exited through the hotel's service entrance, she could hear another radio spark to life. She tore down the street and found a spot to hide in a nearby alleyway. She knew no Saudi woman was out this late at night without a good reason, and she couldn't think of one. It was best not to be seen at all. She could see the street but the darkness of the passageway protected her. The man who followed her ran past, accompanied by two others similarly dressed. She pushed away the fear she felt, into a small, dark corner of her mind, and waited for ten minutes, until she felt sure they had gone.

*Rule Three: If possible, identify the people assisting your adversary.*

Reaching into her pocket, she used Abdul's cell phone to dial the number on his note and listened as it rang. She pulled part of her blouse sleeve to cover the cell phone's microphone and muffle her voice. She waited while it rang. An Arabic voice demanded to know, "Is it done?"

She remembered her mother telling her how her uncle had imitated an enemy's voice to lure their helpers. Parroting a guttural voice to sound as husky as she could, she whispered back in Arabic, "Yes, but I am hurt. Please hurry." She snapped the cell closed, and watched the other side of the street for Abdul's ride to arrive. In five minutes a dirty old Volkswagen Microbus, with the side windows covered, pulled to a stop. Very likely, his transport.

Cassie entered its license plate number and description into her cell phone. Then she moved deep into the alleyway to the exit on the next street behind. After ten minutes, the Microbus was surely gone. She limped, hunched over and trying to appear older, traveling down a series of side streets and alleys toward the eastern edge of the city, near the restaurants.

After several minutes, distancing herself from the hotel and her pursuers, she found a dumpster by an alleyway next to the Marriott Hotel. She hid behind it, with a clear view of the street.

*Rule Four: Call for urgent extraction and follow instructions to the letter.* Cassie pulled her satellite phone from her pocket. "I am call-sign Swiftshadow, event passkey 'Cerberus.' Require urgent extraction, Riyadh, corner of Olaya and Mecca Road. Reply ASAP. End message." Less than a minute passed and the satphone vibrated. She tried to sound calm. "Details, please."

A male voice replied, "Wait exactly where you are. There in ten."

Cassie sighed with relief. "Acknowledged. Thanks. I'm being pursued. I don't have ten minutes. Be here soonest." She pressed buttons to turn off the satphone and hoped nothing else went wrong. She hoped she'd be gone before they found evidence implicating her in this mess.

What a mistake. Two days in country and all she did was get raped by her hit man. She wondered what to tell McDougal, and what he'd tell his boss, Gilbert Greenfield. She'd be the joke of the agency, and probably end up behind a desk if they didn't fire her ass.

The man who'd chased her down the hotel's staircase reappeared. He stood just a few feet in front of the dumpster. She could see him and hear

him breathing hard. Cassie shivered in fear. He faced away from her, toward the street, speaking into his two-way radio. “No sign of her. According to the readout, Abdul’s cell phone is nearby. Let’s regroup and cover the section south of here. I think the little thief is close. I’ll wait for you here, at the alleyway.”

Cassie cursed silently. She snapped the battery out from her assassin’s cell, then watched as two others joined him coming from different directions, converging right in front of her, less than seven feet away. She shrunk deeper into the alleyway. To calm herself, she dug deep for a memory. But all she could think of were the pieces of Evan’s photo, in the trash and now lost to her forever.

She snapped back into focus when another dirty van rounded the corner of Mecca Road and slowed to a stop. At first she thought it might be Abdul’s ride returning, but she looked and listened. Its shape was subtly different and the exhaust from its engine sounded quieter.

The van’s rear door opened. From within she heard “Swiftshadow” whispered. Cassie wondered about the agency mole. Was this ride safe for her? But she had no choice.

The three men who’d followed her all turned toward the van.  
She needed a diversion.

Cassie reached into her pocket and found her room key. She threw it as far into the street as she could, away from herself and the van. The three large men twisted their heads in the direction of the sound.

Cassie dashed from the dumpster into the street. A two-step head start was all she got. All three men saw her and sprinted after her, gaining as she hurtled through the air into the arms of one of her three rescuers inside the van. She slipped back and dug her hands into his thighs, trying to gain better purchase, but found none.

“Get us the fuck out of here!” she screamed. The van’s driver floored the gas pedal and Cassie slipped toward the rear and oblivion. One of her legs hit the pavement as hands reached under her arms from within the van. They pulled her in, as one of her pursuers’ hands gripped her ankle, tugging her the other way.

The van continued to pick up speed and Cassie felt as if she was being ripped in half. She kicked at her pursuer furiously with her other foot until she finally connected with his nose with a satisfying crunch and thump. One



of her rescuers pulled her the rest of the way in and slammed the van's rear door.

She turned her face toward the man who'd saved her. "Thanks. I hope the rest of our journey is less a problem for you."

The man just nodded his head.

Her cover was blown. She'd be useless to the agency.

Worse, those who'd hunted her might still want her dead.

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## CHAPTER 4

*June 6, 4:12 p.m.  
Headquarters of Gilbert Greenfield's  
unnamed intelligence agency,  
K Street, Washington, DC*

“So let me get this straight. Not only did you blow your cover, but you also let an amateur hit man into your room, and then for a grand finale, after he *fucked* you, you murdered him?” Assistant Deputy Director Mark McDougal, a big man, scratched the top of his bald head.

His face reddened. “All you had to do was follow our orders, Cassandra. We told you, you’re a thief, a computer hacker. No one trained you to be a courier. We have people for that. You weren’t trained to kill because you weren’t supposed to.”

He shook his head. “What a mess. Did it ever occur to you that when the Saudis find out who murdered that man, they’ll extradite you and publicly sever your head?” His face grew darker red, looking to Cassie like a glowing lighthouse signaling danger.

McDougal took a deep breath. “Just how did this all happen? And, sorry for the need for personal details, but I’ll figure out what goes into the printed report and what stays out. So, begin your report now.” He turned on a digital voice recorder.

Cassie edged her body away from the conference room table on which McDougal’s thick arms rested. Before today, she’d always admired the lack of emotions from her mentor. *No one has ever seen him lose his temper.*

She didn’t expect him to offer sympathy about the rape. She had made the mistake of letting the man enter her hotel room, and the massive failure depressed her. Metallic gray clouds outside mirrored her feelings.

She described the events of her evening in Riyadh, the words coming

in a monotone, slow and clear. Cassie felt herself detached, as though someone else was reporting the events in Riyadh. She gave no details about her rape other than to state, “One thing I’m sure of: someone must have spent a great deal of time and money discovering my call-sign.” She didn’t say what she thought. *My cover was blown by someone from this agency.*

At the end of her report, she shrugged. “Well, I did complete my assignment, if that’s worth anything.”

“I’m sure Director Greenfield will be pleased,” McDougal said sarcastically. “Okay, so for as long as it takes for us to complete our investigation, you’re on leave. Consider it unpaid vacation. Now, please remove your sorry ass from my office and from this building.”

Her career with the agency had been a point of pride with her until now. Was this the end of it?

As she left McDougal’s office a hard rain fell. She didn’t bother with her umbrella. Rain washed over her, merging with her tears.

\* \* \*

Cassie paced her small DC tenement apartment on F Street NW, avoiding the windows out of a fear that someone might be watching. *I’m getting paranoid about all that’s happened.* She knew the building was once an office, then during the days of rock-bottom mortgage interest rates it had gone condo. *When they renovated, could they have failed to seal all the entrances that were originally here in this pre-911 office building?*

She sat in the center of the studio. Her “chair” had once been a large spool for telephone wire, which she’d salvaged off the street after moving into the apartment. It remained her favorite.

She tapped her fingers on the wood. *Being trapped here is making me crazy.*

Evan’s death haunted her once more, and the memory mixed with that of her rape in some disconnected bit of logic. Evan had enlisted in the army. Dangerous. She had let herself be hired into a clandestine role. Again, dangerous. Was she trying to prove she could handle what killed him? She whispered to herself, “What have I done?”

Desperate to change her mood, she picked up her Martin D-18 guitar, stroking its smooth wood lines. After Evan’s death, she’d sought solace and

spent way too much money on this guitar, then learned to play it. It had become a mirror for her soul. Cassie's thumb alternated bass while her index and middle fingers picked out the tune. She sang the last verse of "One Kind Favor," an old Blind Lemon Jefferson song that ended with the line, "See that my grave is kept clean."

The words of the song reminded her again of Evan's funeral. What would he think of her now? Cassie found her tears falling onto the guitar, blues personified.

She placed the guitar back on its little stand. The instrument cost almost a month's salary. It had been her act of spite for his selfishness in enlisting. Now, the guitar felt like his memorial.

Cassie peeked out the window at the alleyway between her apartment and the building next door. She stared down the narrow path, her face blank, her body damaged, her soul as empty as the alley.

Was a group of assassins out there, biding time until tonight?

She wondered again what had triggered her attack. The agency had her steal money and hack secrets from so many terrorist groups. Could that be what had made them want her dead? Or was it some secret she'd stumbled on? She couldn't think of anything she'd learned that might alarm anybody. What did she know that she wasn't aware she knew?

Cassie had been warned by McDougal, "avoid friendships. Friends are intrusive." Even her parents had no idea what she really did. Almost every phone call she received at her apartment was agency business or business of Brewster Jennings and Associates.

Days passed, and she grew lonelier. The phone remained silent. Even a conversation with McDougal might improve her mood.

The wait was driving her crazy. She thumbed absently through the address book on her cell, and saw it. Kiril, her father. Today was his birthday. She gulped down a cup of hot coffee to jar her into focus. Her daddy had taught her chess when she was nine years old. While they sat in the old house, the ocean waves outside pounding the surf under the fog, he'd smiled and said, "Kitten, logical thought is what separates common from genius. Learn to do this well and you will always be able to outmaneuver others." This advice had always worked for her before. But now, her trouble defied logic.

She thought of her home, where her mama ruled the kitchen. She

remembered learning how to cook the dishes Mama called “the beauties of Russia.” She ached to be with them.

She couldn’t restrain herself; dialed the number in Half Moon Bay, California. Her mother’s Russian accent droned, “Natasha Sashakovich.”

“Mama.”

“Cassandra! We wondered if you’d call.”

“How are you and Daddy?”

“I’m fine. Your father is in garage, in office, working on Markov chains for forecast of Swiss franc differentials against US dollar. Hold on, kitten, I go for him now.” She heard her mother shout, “Kiril! Your daughter.”

Cassie could visualize him keying mathematical formulas into the input-output forecasting system he’d developed. Her eyes filled with tears.

*“Da, da, ya gavoryu.”*

She could hear her father’s feet clunking against the wooden steps from the garage into the old mudroom adjacent to the kitchen. His voice huffed from exertion, “Kitten, how are you?”

Cassie pictured his long, thin face and reddish goatee. “Okay, I guess. I called to wish you a happy birthday. Wish I could be there to hug you. Daddy, how are you?”

Kiril cleared his throat. “Well enough. We just receive telephone call from your Uncle Misha in Muskva.”

Moscow. She’d never met her Uncle Misha but her mother had told her complicated stories about his covert missions with the KGB and then with the FSB as the Soviet empire fell. He’d been forbidden to leave Russia and now functioned as an arms merchant, funneling weapons between the Russian government and the Russian mafiya. His stolen items were sold to Third World countries for use in wars in Africa and the Middle East. Misha changed his last name from Sashakovich to Kovich. Her father always seemed afraid to say anything about his brother.

Cassie thought Misha scum, a criminal. She believed he’d dragged her father into his sordid world. Her world. The only evidence of his real existence was a thirty-year-old black-and-white photo in her parent’s living room, displaying his prominent cheekbones and jutting chin. The arrogance in the photograph screamed “killer” to her.

“Daddy, I called you, not Uncle Misha.” She lightened her grip on the

phone's receiver. "What were you doing in the garage?"

"Lesson plans for Stanford graduate students. All bright peoples this semester."

He paused. "Kitten, this call must cost fortune. Please call again soon, my dear. Walk with my love. Always."

Within seconds Cassie was once again alone. Her heart ached for her parents' company.

\* \* \*

Cassie suspected she was still at risk. Someone out there had his meal money coming from her death. She decided not to leave the apartment even to go to the tiny "health club" in the building. The apartment building didn't come with a doorman, and the mailboxes sat in a dangerous spot, in full view of the street, so she decided to let the mail accumulate in the lobby mailbox.

Later that day she called to have groceries and dry cleaning delivered. When a food delivery arrived, remembering Riyadh, she answered the door with her chef's knife hidden in her hand behind her back.

Cassie tried hacking the agency computers to learn if they'd discovered anything about the mysterious phone number carried by her assassin. The first time, their firewall stopped her.

She cursed and tried again, this time using specialized hacker software designed to penetrate firewalls. But the agency had changed its security procedures. It had to be the work of the Director of Security, a man named Lee Ainsley. She'd never liked him. Knew he was very bright, but this wasn't fair. She needed intel and he was keeping her from obtaining it. She searched the newsgroups for a work-around, but failed three more times. Trying yet again would risk exposure. She'd have to wait until McDougal resolved her status.

She spent hours in forced solitude. She ate too much, and most of it just didn't taste good. A bad case of nerves, she thought, throwing up after eating too much of one perfectly good *tajine*.

She watched the Al Jazeera Internet news, more to find out if the Saudis had discovered the body of Abdul Hassain than to learn current events. There was nothing reported, alarming her even more.

Sounds from the busy street outside her apartment had her chewing her nails until they bled.

She wondered what McDougal had said to Greenfield about her. Had her fate already been decided?

She imagined the phone call she would soon receive from McDougal. Using her notebook computer, she listed a number of the questions he might ask and scripted a number of alternative responses. She practiced until she could carry out the discussion without having to look at the computer screen.

But when she slept, questions returned in her nightmares, followed by her angry responses—things she dared not even think when she was awake.

She woke and cried, berating herself over what she should have done when she heard the knock on her hotel room door in Riyadh.

\* \* \*

Her greatest fear was what had happened to one of the CIA's analysts, Valerie Plame, who'd run the country desk for Iran. Suppose it happened to her? Plame had lost her career at the CIA when her cover had been divulged by the White House. She'd been blown and burned after developing a system of NOCs she'd managed in Iran. Her NOCs weren't officially agency employees, and performed work on a volunteer or contract basis for the agency.

Plame's disclosure wasn't for the reasons the press suspected. Investigative reporters claimed it was retribution for her husband Joe Wilson's *New York Times* op-ed piece stating that Iraq hadn't purchased uranium from Niger.

But Cassie knew, along with almost everyone in Washington, that the true reason had to do with Plame's knowledge of Iran, dealing with nuclear weapons proliferation in Iran, not Iraq.

The White House had prepared to wage war against Iran in those days, and didn't want the CIA to dispute its claims that there were nukes being developed in Iran as well as in Iraq. She shook her head. No nukes in Iran back then, and with Plame gone, no one to dispute the administration's claims.

It seemed that things in Washington never changed. In the intelligence

business, operatives had to deal not just with the risks of espionage and competition within their own intelligence service, but also with survival in an increasingly politicized environment. *What you know, what you learn can get you killed!*

Mark McDougal gave her rules of engagement on her first day of work. Back then, he was all smiles, a friendly giant.

He'd passed her a stack of employment forms and showed her where to sign and initial. "You'll be employed and paid by a private-sector consulting corporation. You'll have "non-official cover." We call such personnel "NOCs." We do this with all operatives hired in the past twenty years, to reduce the possibility we might have to answer to Congressional oversight committees about black ops. Congress leaks like a sieve and could endanger the security of our in-country intel networks. In your case, the consulting contracts are for mundane things like a foreign government's forecasting of its gross national product. That gets people like you out into the field and your cover work is legitimate. Of course, I reserve the right to alter your forecasts if I believe a better result would promote our national policy goals."

He'd waited for her to nod her head in acknowledgement before continuing. "You'll perform cover assignments in econometric forecasting for the consulting company while you're in-country, and hack into Islamic extremist bank accounts and transfer the money you find there to the bank accounts of either the agency or the governments of friendly nations, in return for things we negotiate with their leaders. The state of banking and computer technology in the Middle East requires you to be in-country because their banking technology is a bit dicey. Some of the computers you need entry to aren't connected to any networks. That means occasionally you may have to covertly enter a bank at night while you're there, to plant an electronic backdoor or a Trojan horse. Or to expunge your hacking trail if you fail to, before they complete their end-of-day processing cycle."

After she'd started working at the agency, she heard other coverts talk about their "life insurance policies," classified files they stored at home or in safe deposit boxes, to keep their agencies from "Plaming" them without blowback from the covert agent. She bought a 64 gig thumbdrive and had a belt buckle made with a lead-lined cavity to snugly fit the tiny storage device. She routinely wore it to work, passing it through security so she



could copy files she thought would serve as her life insurance policy. Being caught would bring down a prison sentence for her, but being Plamed and burned could result in her death.

At home, she'd copied these files from the agency onto her personal computer's local disk and then onto a thumb-drive. She kept the thumb-drive in a space she'd hollowed between bricks behind the massive hot water heater in the basement of her building.

In Cassie's PhD program, her father had taught her several forecasting methodologies, including Wassily Leontief's input-output forecasting methodology. He'd worked with Leontief in the Soviet Union as a KGB adjunct back in the Cold War, before her family immigrated to the United States as the empire fell.

Her father encouraged her to develop improvements to input-output analysis. To incorporate a second-stage forecast of errors, she created a unique adaptation of the methodology, calling it *MINIMAPE*, for *Minimize Mean Absolute Percentage*. Her forecasts were spot on, with insignificant error rates, regardless of whether she was forecasting a macro value such as market demand for telecommunications or a micro value like sales of a specific product.

The agency had taught her hacking from teachers who'd served prison sentences for their hacking exploits. She absorbed new hacking techniques quickly, and used a personal computer or a cell phone to design creative adjustments on the fly. Soon she could hack through any bank's computer security network.

Her skills in financial forecasting and global banking had won her assignments that also allowed her to serve the agency abroad as a first-rate hacker.

Her multilingual family had encouraged her as a child to develop a facility with languages as she grew up. Her parents spoke Russian in the house and she'd learned it naturally, along with English. The agency sent her to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey for counterterrorism coursework. While there, she'd attended the Army's Defense Language Institute, located on the same campus, to learn many of the languages and dialects of the Middle East. They also taught her Middle Eastern cultures and religions. With two atheists for parents, she found the entire concept of "God" confusing.

The agency had her hack funds from Muslim extremist bank accounts in Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and Jordan. Her total over the last two years exceeded \$600 million in stolen funds.

She'd never worked in Iran; it was now closed to the West. Or Afghanistan, where Evan had died when his platoon had patrolled a violent part of Nangarhar province. The IED that ended him had a focused charge. It had blown a hole through his Humvee, reducing his body to a single smudge of flesh.

Not since graduation from the economics program at Stanford had she been so confused about her life. And although she'd occasionally felt fear, it had never paralyzed her like this.

\* \* \*

Gilbert Greenfield patted down his thinning hair as he admired himself in the glass of the window in his office. Short, thin, and dapper, he'd risen to the agency's directorship with the current administration's election to office, and, as a former college roommate and personal friend of the President, Greenfield was committed to everything the administration wanted. In addition to his law school diploma, his office wall was filled with photographs of him and the President. He used the photos as intimidation objects against all visitors. He'd grown to love the espionage business, especially the toys used by spies.

Outside, he could see rain pouring down, a dissonant rhythmic tapping against the broad windows. His secretary knocked on the door. "Come."

She was a short, dour woman. "McDougal," was all she said.

"Show him in." Greenfield spun his chair to face the entrance.

Mark McDougal nodded, then sat on the couch. "I have the tape." Greenfield nodded back and McDougal played the tape of Sashakovich's debrief in its entirety.

"What a piece of work." Greenfield ran his fingers through his brown hair. "This is just what the agency can't afford. An operative who doesn't play by our rules. What did you tell her?"

McDougal shrugged. "I told her we'd investigate what happened. It won't be easy. Very hard to ask questions about a murder in another country

without leading that country's investigators to the very incident you're trying to cover up. Luckily, according to our country desk, the Saudis haven't tumbled to the conclusion Sashakovich is the murderess, and that she's one of ours."

"This situation is one big piece of crap." Greenfield shook his head. "Let me know when you finish your investigations and we can decide what to do with her. She's bright. A shame and a waste to let her go. But if we can't find some other way to use her, that's what we'll have to do."

"Yes, sir." McDougal rose to leave Greenfield's office. At the door, he breathed a sigh, as if he'd gotten away with something. Then he turned around. "Sir, what do we do if the Saudis learn Sashakovich murdered that man?"

Greenfield sighed. "We'd be up the creek. They'll request her extradition."

"And behead her in public, in Chop Chop Square."

"Yeah, but before they get to the main act, they'll torture her, milk her like a cow in the barn, sucking out everything she knows."

"Shit. What if the Saudis learn we've been feeding them bad forecasts?"

Greenfield felt his impatience grow. "What if they find out the rest? If they give her a Pentothal derivative, the "flu" vaccine we gave everyone last year would kill her in seconds, just as we designed it to. But the Saudis are fond of traditional torture, way more than they are of truth drugs."

McDougal nodded. "Uh, so you think they'll learn everything, then sell it to all of those we've diddled? The intel she knows will find its way to country governments all over the Middle East, Asia, Central and South America. Everyone will guess the reality of US policies and the hidden intentions behind them."

Greenfield nodded back. "Exactly. And, when that knowledge becomes public, there'll be bloodshed everywhere, at every US embassy. In the event they find out about her and demand her return to face a death sentence, we'd have to bury her before they can. Literally."

McDougal's expression showed resignation. "You mean terminate her?"

"Let's hope it never comes to that. But if we kill her, at least she'd escape the pain of torture. More important, it would keep Congress from

having shit fits up and down Capitol Hill knowing our operatives had been hidden from view as “subcontractors” for over twenty years.”

On the way back to his own office, McDougal whispered to himself, “Sashakovich is a dead woman.”

\* \* \*

The mole paced behind his desk at Gilbert Greenfield’s nameless spy agency as the day ended. The building slowly emptied, spies and bureaucrats crowding elevators on their way to the employee parking lots. Gradually, it grew so quiet the mole could hear no sound. Picking up the cell phone, the mole stared out the window at the setting sun as he dialed an international number. “Guten Tag, Herr Flouber. I have a numbered account with the name Ellbert E. Friend. 87-2458-9716-LF. Please make the following changes to my investment accounts.” The mole picked the list off the desk and read the buy and sell orders from it. It took only a minute. “Danke. Auf Wiedersehen.” Of course, there was no such person as Ellbert E. Friend, even though the mole held a passport with the name. In fact, the mole held over twenty backstopped passports with names and legends that weren’t anyone’s. And each had its own corresponding numbered account. The mole moved down the list, calling the others.

Then, the mole opened orders issued to a few select covert operatives working at the agency. The mole thought how a position in covert work made it possible not merely to anticipate market movements but to actually make markets move. The nexus of economics was always politics, and intelligence drove politics these days. The mole smiled, rose from the desk, and grabbed a Burberry raincoat. In seconds the mole had closed the office door and was on the way to the elevator, one of the last to leave the building as the evening shift arrived.

\* \* \*

Sun from the bright morning glowed off the bulletproof glass of the Oval Office. The President sat on the couch. Greenfield was the only other person there.

The spymaster looked at his manicured nails as he listened to the free world’s nominal leader. “Gil, I don’t feel so good about this. Never did. I

know you think this is the best way to control the situation, but the last time we set 'em up, it didn't work so good. They weren't supposed to kill everyone in the embassy. Shit. Last time, I took your advice. But now? Not so much. We can't control them."

Greenfield's hands clenched and he brought them into his lap so the President couldn't see. "Mr. President, it's not your job to control them. To remain blameless and retain deniability, you can't even know the entire story. As long as we give them limited funds and limited objectives, it should work. We can always stop them just before they do real damage, and that'd be a great story to support your party and your legacy. It's my job to control them. Trust me. You always have. We've been a great team. Since college." He smiled. "It'll all work out."

The squirrel-faced man shook his head. "I'm not so sure, Gil. When you originally proposed this, it was designed to keep my party in power. But if they mess up again, it could cost the next election. Look, promise me you'll keep them under control. Okay?"

Greenfield thought, *you're a lame duck, you idiot. Who cares who runs the country when we're outta here? We'll both be rich!* He nodded. "Yes sir. Don't worry. I'll control the Houmaz group."

\* \* \*

Wearing sweatpants to hide the five pounds she'd gained, Cassie paced her apartment like a caged animal. She called McDougal but his secretary stopped her with, "He's away from the office." Obsessed, she tried three times the next day, without success.

She sat reading an ebook novel by Barry Eisler. The ringing of her cell jarred her. She tapped Accept Call and his voice boomed from the answering machine. "Cassandra? It's Mark McDougal."

She took a deep breath before responding. "I'm here."

His words came in a slow, quiet monotone, as if he read from written notes: "We completed the investigation, and the agency has a problem we can't resolve. The license plate you gave us in Riyadh simply doesn't exist. We haven't found who the phone number belongs to. And those initials you gave us could be almost anyone. If we actively tried tracing those calls, our contacts in Saudi Arabia would assume we were culpable for something.

We don't know how your cover was blown, but because it was, we don't dare use you for any covert assignment abroad."

So this was it. She'd be relegated to a desk job. *Shit.*

"You were a good operative, with an admirable track record of success. But that's over. I'm sorry, Cassandra, but given what you did in Riyadh—murdering a local resident—the agency feels we have no choice but to terminate your employment."

Cassie felt her face go red with rage and shock. Her hands shook as she tried to root the cell phone to her ear. "What? Fire me? And over the telephone?"

"We don't want you entering the building. There may still be a contract to take you out. A hit outside the lobby of a federal office building wouldn't sit well with Congress."

She almost dropped the phone and sat down, speechless. This was a "burn notice." She'd be cut off not only from her cover but also from the agency's protection. Abandoned, to fend for herself. Rarely done, and never open to appeal.

But then an unwelcome thought occurred to her. She thought, *he called me Cassandra! He only called me by my given name once, when he was angry at our last meeting. It was always "Cassie." Why? That's what Abdul called me!*

Unbidden, a thought flew through her mind, sending a chill down her spine. *Was Mark involved with my cover being blown?* But there wasn't enough data for her to come to that conclusion. She turned her attention back to the conversation with her suddenly former boss.

McDougal continued speaking as if she just agreed with his logic. "We'll send a messenger to your apartment to pick up your badge and any agency-related material you possess, and to deliver your severance paycheck. We're giving you one week for every year."

"No! This just isn't fair! In fact, it's wrong. You can't treat me like garbage and then spit me out." But there was silence on the other end of the line. She could hear McDougal breathing.

Cassie was powerless to alter her fate. McDougal had made up his mind, and he'd gotten Greenfield's concurrence, or this conversation wouldn't be happening.

She thought about her next move—her next statements—trying to get

more from him. She'd need the money from her final paycheck. But she was afraid to leave the apartment and take a walk to a bank branch. Not safe. To McDougal, this threat was so serious, he didn't want her in the agency's lobby. "All right, then, at least direct-deposit the severance into my checking account as you do my paychecks."

"Sorry, your employee records were sealed shut this morning. It's a paper check or nothing."

Even a walk outside to deposit a check into an ATM machine might be dangerous.

Then, with a growing sense of alarm it dawned on Cassie she'd have to flee right away. *I must start by changing my appearance and assemble a set of false identities.*

She didn't even want an agency messenger visiting her apartment. "Mail the check. I'll mail the badge and anything else I have in less than ten minutes from the mail chute in my apartment building as soon as I hang up."

"You can't mail classified intelligence to this address!"

Cassie realized she'd been shoved out of the agency forever. It no longer mattered how she behaved. She'd never get a reference from the agency for another job in any case.

Worse, she realized she wasn't safe anymore. She shivered in the warm apartment and drew herself together, remembering McDougal was still on the phone. She said, "It's that or nothing. The stuff's in an envelope and I'm sealing it now. Bye, Mr. McDougal."

When Cassie hung up, rage heated her face. She focused on controlling her breathing to recover from the shock. She shouldn't have been surprised. Her anger turned to fear and her mind raced in every direction at once. She breathed deep and long and said, "Focus, Cassie, focus, Cassie" aloud over and over.

What had they taught her to do when she fled? Damn, she'd just done this when she was in Riyadh! Then she looked around her apartment and created a mental to-do list.

*Rule One* didn't apply—there was no body to hide. At least not yet.

Before she went on to *Rule Two*, she made copies of everything she would mail back to the agency. Months ago she'd acquired all the tools she needed—a laminator and magnetic ink—from agency contacts she'd met

during her covert career. The ink came from Norman Cisco in New York, a friendly vendor who worked for the Federal Reserve Bank downtown and did side contract work for the agency. She wondered if she could convince him to help her out. She reached into her desk and pulled out an opened package of thumb-drives.

She used her computer's all-in-one printer to scan everything she had from the agency, including her ID badge. She copied them onto a thumb-drive and labeled them "Photos from Mom's last visit in April," numbered 1 through 3. And, for good measure, she made a second copy of the thumb-drive and placed it into a pocket of the jeans she intended to wear when she left her apartment later that day, for the last time.

Then she placed the agency's papers and her badge in a large envelope and, after ensuring no one was outside her apartment door, she carried her chef's knife with her as she stuffed the envelope into the mail chute just outside the door to her apartment. It was 2:08 p.m.

*Rule Two: Assemble a false identity and escape looking for all the world like a local.* Off to the computer. She used the Internet and Google Maps and found a new home town, Woodbine, Iowa, suitably tiny and remote. Cassie used her cell phone's camera to take photos of her face and crafted a new identity. She toyed with the idea of passing herself off as a man. She knew she could, with her flat chest. But she'd be more comfortable disguised as a female.

She formatted and printed a new driver's license, and used an agency portable laminator she'd "borrowed" to finish the process. She picked a first name and a last name from two adjacent lines in Woodbine Iowa's on-line phone directory. In less than thirty minutes she was Denise Hardcastle, a fiction writer from Woodbine. It seemed most appropriate to cover herself as a writer because she'd be living a life full of stories and lies no one could ever believe. If she survived.

Burned, she had no way to use the agency to find out which Islamic extremist group had killed her career. She made a mental note to figure this out later. Her top priority now was to clear out as fast as she could.

Cassie hacked into Wells Fargo and opened a bank account at their Des Moines branch, where Hardcastle might easily have had a banking relationship before moving east. Then, reaching deep into her memory, she recalled the bank account number of the Houmaz organization she'd hacked



for the agency just twenty-two days ago in Riyadh.

She sent just over five thousand dollars from the Houmaz family—through several other bank accounts the agency used—to Hardcastle’s new bank account. Cassie printed a few checks using the MICR printer she’d acquired long ago from Norman Cisco. Its magnetic ink allowed a bank’s check-processing equipment to authenticate the checks.

She copied all the documents she might need onto another thumb-drive and turned off the computer. In five more minutes the computer’s hard disk was in her attaché case.

One question troubled her: if she lived long enough to reach someplace where she could find lodging, where would her assumed identity of “fiction writer” look to stay? She found the answer on her bookshelf in the living room. It was a book she’d bought on a whim when she’d wanted to find solitude after her fight with Evan: *Writers’ and Artists’ Hideouts: Great Getaways for Seducing the Muse*, by Andrea Brown. Cassie dropped the book in her case.

She entered the kitchen, her sanctuary, pride, and joy. All the ingredients she needed were there to make her final meal before she crossed forever from its comfort. Lamb curry with saffron pilaf. She opened and inhaled the scents from jars of saffron threads, curry paste, and sour garlic pickles.

Before she realized it, she was crying.

But she’d learned at The Farm to eat when you could. Your next meal might not be for a long while. She swiftly cooked and ate a Thai curried lamb dish. While she cooked, she munched on a pickle. Then she ate a quart of ice cream.

*Escape looking like a local.* No, that wouldn’t work. She’d need to change her appearance so she could escape without being identified. Best if she looked homeless, someone people shifted their eyes away from. A nameless nonperson they wouldn’t want to see. An outcast.

Cassie stripped off her clothes, entered the bathroom, gave herself a haircut. It was short and uneven. She found a bottle of black shoe polish in her closet and streaked her long, chestnut hair. She colored her eyebrows, letting the colors set while she filled the bathtub halfway. Cassie opened another bottle of shoe polish, this one brown, and poured both liquids into the bath, along with some red shoe polish she had.

It would be ugly, but it was the best she could hope for. Cassie sat in the tub. She poured the tub's liquid over her face, under her arms, onto her chest. She took a deep breath and immersed herself deep into the diluted polish. She got out and looked into the mirror. Skin that used to be a pale cream was dusky now. Her hair had gone from longish and light brown to wild, short, and multicolored light and dark. If no one got too close, it might be believable.

After she used a hair drier to blow-dry her body, she placed her oldest and closest-to-threadbare raincoat in the bathtub part way, coloring parts of it, staining it. Cassie dried the raincoat with her drier. In her closet was a ski cap, perfect for completing the disguise. She applied the contents of a jar of K-Y jelly from her nightstand all over her hair, then placed the ski cap on her head, leaving gobs of greasy-looking hair hanging from the cap. Slimy.

Cassie found an old outfit she'd planned on donating to the Salvation Army, and put it on. Then she put on the newly stained old raincoat.

In her attaché case she placed her cell phone and three sets of underwear, two dress blouses, and one pair of slacks. She squeezed it shut and placed the attaché case into an old paper shopping bag, which she covered with small boxes of dry food and water bottles.

She picked up the shopping bag. As she stood in front of the mirror, Cassie momentarily felt disconnected from her body. The person reflected there was a complete stranger, one who looked as homeless as Cassie felt.

She took a last look around.

She'd be leaving her Martin D-18 guitar behind. There was nothing she could do to change this. Her heart ached. But, she didn't have time for sentimentality. She wiped her cheeks and kept moving.

One last check to make sure she had everything. With the chef's knife in her hand, she approached the apartment door.

She was as prepared as she could ever be to run for her life.

## CHAPTER 5

*June 12, 6:51 p.m.*

*F Street NW, Washington, DC*

Dressed like a homeless person, Cassie was ready for flight. With the shopping bag and the chef's knife in one hand, she opened the apartment door and peeked out into the hallway. Empty. She maintained her grip on the knife as she silently, slowly walked the hall.

Someone in the building's lobby might be watching the elevator indicator lights to see if it visited her floor.

A line of perspiration formed on her lip. She decided to take the stairs down six stories to the third floor, two steps at a time, fast, silent. There, she buzzed the elevator and waited. She rode it to the basement, alert to its grinding passage and fearing it might stop at the lobby.

When the doors opened in the basement, she took a deep breath and exited. In a space she'd hollowed out between two bricks two years ago when she'd first moved in, behind the building's water heater, she deposited one of her two thumb-drives. Hidden in plain sight. Insurance. Just in case.

The elevator was still there. Without getting in, Cassie sent it up to the ninth floor, to her apartment. If there were hostiles in the building she hoped they were paying attention to the elevator light. Then she took the fire stairs leading to the service entrance in the basement where the trash service entered to collect the building's garbage.

*Rule Three: If possible, identify the people assisting your adversary.* She took each step with deliberate care, the knife tight in her sweaty grip. Silently, she left the building and entered the alleyway that exited onto the street in front of the apartment.

Cassie moved along the shady side of the alleyway toward the exit from the alleyway. She found cover against the dark red brick and edged her

head to let one eye see the street.

And, as she'd feared, there it was. Cassie couldn't be sure, of course, so maybe it was just an old, unmarked van. But, driven by terror, she waited until she could calm herself. Threatened by every person walking down the street past the alleyway where she hid, she forced herself to peek and took another, more thorough look.

The sun reflected off a tiny point in one of the van's panel joints. It was round and regular, shaped like a bullet hole. A lens for a videocam. Not a good time to leave her hiding space—her disguise wasn't foolproof in the bright afternoon light. She entered the van's license plate number into her cell phone's notes app and watched patiently.

A man dressed in a utility outfit emerged from the front of her building, beckoning toward the van. The van's door opened and two men emerged. Dressed in shades of gray and blue, almost camouflage against the concrete buildings, they crossed the street and entered her building. Their faces were dark, possibly Middle Eastern. Their gray raincoats were not quite big enough to hide the bulges of automatic weapons in shoulder holsters. One held what appeared to be a broom handle, but its end was sharpened to a point. Cassie gulped, remembering she'd seen one like that in the linen closet in her hotel in Riyadh.

*Rule Four* didn't apply. No one would help her escape.

And there were no other rules; she'd be on her own until she either escaped or was murdered.

She assumed her hunters carried cell phones and so did the van's driver. If she tried to escape now and the driver noticed, he'd send her description to the men now on their way to her apartment.

Back into the alleyway she went, to its darkest recesses, behind piles of garbage. She waited until dusk. The odor of rotting food left her feeling queasy. She focused on keeping her rebellious stomach calm. The last thing she needed was to toss her lunch.

Cassie remembered her desperate thoughts in Riyadh just a few weeks ago. Could she kill them if she had to, just as she'd murdered Abdul?

From her hiding place, she could see people dressed for business, walking down the street to visit the lobbyist offices in the buildings a few blocks away on K Street. Normal people with normal lives.

One unwelcome thought burst into her mind. Uncle Misha would

know how to get away. Why hadn't she asked her mother more about him when she'd told her stories about the man? *Too late.*

Cassie formed a rudimentary escape plan. She knew at this time of day the sun would set soon, and the streets were already crowded with people heading from their jobs to the Metro on their way home. Good. After sunset but before the streetlights came on, there was a ten-minute gap when the city streets had no street lighting. Even better.

She could leave her cover in the alley then. She looked at her watch. Another five minutes or so. But what of the thugs now in her building? When would they trace her to the alleyway?

A scraping noise in front of her. The alleyway door she'd exited hours ago sprung open again.

The door clanked closed as the two men from the van pushed their way toward where she hid.

She gasped, her whole body flinched involuntarily with surprise and fear, drawing their attention toward her spot. The thugs looked in her direction and saw her. *Oh shit!* She was so fucked.

She began a noisy search through the garbage, picking up junk, looking at it and tossing it away. From a distance, she hoped she'd look homeless and desperate. She shook her head, muttering to herself. Dusk set in. She deliberately tottered toward the street. Toward the van where her murderers had come from.

She limped past the two men who ignored her in the dimming light. Two hundred yards away, the traffic light at the corner turned red. She waited for a moment, consumed with terror burning her to her core. As the world grew darker, she cleared the alleyway. Cassie pretended talking to herself, holding the paper bag to cover her face, both arms high, walking stagger step, trying to appear frail. She tottered to the corner and turned onto the next block leading away from the van.

The city's lights popped on. She ignored her panic, continued talking to herself and limping down the street, turning again and tacking slowly away from her apartment. She was truly homeless now, and in no rush. There was nowhere she needed to be.

Cassie heard voices behind her and glanced over her shoulder. They were running toward her.

She picked up speed, sprinted, and ducked into the alleyway of the

next building, dashing to its opening onto the street behind.

A young woman left the nearby building's doorway and Cassie dove through before the door closed. She ran into its elevator and waited for its door to close, slowly. Did they see her? She took the elevator to the basement and waited by the service exit. Ten, twenty minutes passed.

As she pushed the service door open, she heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Cassie bolted into the alleyway and took off toward the street. The shopping bag bobbed up and down in her hands as she sprinted as fast as she could, tacking the blocks left then right until, winded, she couldn't run another step.

Cassie panted in fear. She approached a bus stop and, good fortune smiling on her at last, a city bus slowed to a stop.

She rode the bus heading away from downtown. As she'd learned to so long ago, she mounted a surveillance detection route, riding three buses and two Metros. If anyone had tried following her, she'd lost them. She waited in another alleyway for ten minutes and didn't see the van or anyone walking in an obvious search mode.

Cassie completed one additional surveillance detection run without incident. They might be monitoring the airports and train stations. Buses were safer, the least likely and most difficult to manage. An hour later, she entered the Greyhound bus terminal and used her limited cash to buy a ticket to Manhattan, a huge city where she could get lost.

*There, I can finish crafting a new appearance and a new identity.*

Less than an hour later, she boarded the bus and began the first leg of her journey to anywhere but home. She cried, walking down the aisle of the bus, and chose a seat by the emergency exit. Just in case.

\* \* \*

The bus continued north for over four hours. When she could no longer cry, fear faded like a headache passing its peak. It was time for a real plan, one to recover the life she'd lost. *What can I do to make enough money to survive while I figure out how to keep from being hunted? What types of risk can I afford?* At first nothing came to her and she foresaw her own violent death. It took several deep breaths to drive back her fear. She forced herself to think, to determine what path would yield the best possibility for

survival.

But survival by itself would solve no problems.

“They” would always be there, hunting her. “They” played by different rules, slinking through the shadows, eluding capture by going where no one expected them.

That’s what she’d have to do to survive: be someone they didn’t expect. She must think like a terrorist, and use their new rules.

She whispered to herself, “Fight fire with fire.”

One thing was sure: at some point she’d need to find a real solution. The only one that came to mind was to ally with a force large enough to eliminate those hunting her. *I have to kill them all.*

As the bus rode north on I-95 past Philadelphia, she formulated plans for the next weeks through the next year.

Cassie’s skills would make the obvious choice now, to open her own consulting firm, offering clients the same kind of computer hacking she’d been doing for the agency.

It would be dangerous. *How can I eliminate as much risk as possible? I’ll need money, lots of it. At least my consulting skills are saleable.*

She made a list, tapping on the soft keyboard of her cell phone. She decided to call her business the Swiftshadow Consulting Group. But this would be its private name, a name no client would ever see. What would be visible was just the website’s numeric IP address. Groups of numbers separated by decimal points.

She remembered ways to make a website invisible to all except those with an invitation. She carried all the tools she needed on that thumb-drive. Cassie completed a draft of her plan: It was two pages long and contained nine subsections.

### Swiftshadow Consulting Group

1. Tactical requirements
2. Sources of clients
3. Internet security and discoverability
4. Travel issues
5. Skills upgrades

6. Secure hiding places for files and weapons
7. Long game strategy
8. Find and eliminate the mole
9. Fallback plan in case everything fails

Cassie had no idea how to mount an offensive against Muslim extremists, so objectives 7 and 8 would require research. In any case, it was a start. She made a list of anonymous Internet host providers, mostly in countries run by governments hostile to the United States.

\* \* \*

By the time the bus entered the West Side bus depot of the Port Authority Bus Terminal near Times Square, New York, she had complete answers for the first six points.

As she drew near the exit of the bus terminal, it started raining. She stood and looked outside into the gray light dawning. After thinking for several minutes, she made a plan for the next day or two. Think like a Muslim extremist. Point six of the plan suggested she stash her emergency identities and disguises in a locker at the Port Authority bus depot. Then find a surgeon to disguise herself permanently.

Cassie went to the women's bathroom on the second floor of the terminal. It was filthy and reeked. She washed the shoe polish off her face until most of the dye disappeared, then cleaned the K-Y jelly from her hair using the soap dispenser and paper towels. Still feeling gross, she stripped and re-dressed in a clean business outfit from the attaché case, and placed the disguise back in the case. She rented an empty locker in the terminal, placed the case containing her disguise and the emergency stash of identities within, and locked it. *As long as I live in Manhattan, this will be my stash point.*

The rain had stopped and the sun was rising through silver clouds as she walked onto Ninth Avenue and crossed 42nd Street. Cassie headed north and east toward the higher-rent districts.

On Forty-Fifth Street at Sixth Avenue she stopped and thought about her next task. *Change my appearance.* She drew her cell phone from her



pocket and scanned the yellow pages website. Cassie found a plastic surgeon on 57th Street at Second Avenue. She pulled the battery from the cell and dropped it in the trash. She'd need replacements.

She found an electronics store and purchased several burner cell phones under another name, Sylvia Chase. More difficult to trace back to her. But not impossible. She used her cell phone's Internet function to review the plastic surgeon's reputation. He seemed to be the best in town. She called to book an appointment, then dropped the burner in the trash.

For the three hours before her appointment, she found a bookstore on Sixth Avenue across the street from the Time-Life building and read several guides to Manhattan. At The Farm, they'd taught her to blend in, to look and act like a local. She studied others walking the nearby aisles of the store, what they wore, how they walked, what they said. Every time she heard someone speaking, Cassie subvocally mimicked their accent until she got it flat. She read all about Manhattan, seeking knowledge to help her find obscure hideouts. On maps she found several locations with multiple escape routes and no choke points.

\* \* \*

The surgeon's office was plush, a showcase for Doctor Henry Sheldorff's success. Cassie suspected he'd had his own face redecorated. He looked ageless. There wasn't a wrinkle or a crease visible on his face.

"You're very lucky. I had a cancellation for this afternoon. Patient developed a nose cold just before I was to head off to the NYU Medical Center. Uh, why do you want to change your face, Ms. Hardcastle?"

She littered her speech with a heavy Brooklyn accent. "Well, see, I want my nose to be perfect. Everyone just thinks I had it done. So now I actually need to get it done, but I want it to look natural, see? I want it just a bit flatter. You know what I mean? And I want you to do my lips, too. So, when can you fit me in?"

She saw him watch for her reaction.

He stared at her nose, his face muscles working, obvious doubt there. "Are you joking? Your nose is adequate, nowhere near perfect, and making it flatter would cause it to become downright ugly. What you want me to do will make you much less attractive. More's the pity. I recommend you not

have this surgery.”

Cassie worked hard to show nothing. “Look, I want this, see? If you won’t do it, I’ll find someone else. So what’s it to be?”

“It’s your money. Maybe we can agree on changes that would be better for you than the ones you want. Some simpler ones, much less expensive than trimming your nose. I could alter your cheeks and make them more prominent. Make your chin just a bit more noticeable to give you a more fitting and assertive look. My alternative would make you look prettier. That I’m willing to do. Thursday afternoon is when I do these. The specific changes require just a few silicone injections with a local anesthetic so I do them right here, in my office.”

Two days from now. She’d have to remain homeless for two more days. But after this, she could reconsider her options. Cassie sighed, disappointed Sheldorff couldn’t perform the surgery sooner.

“I’ll be here fifteen minutes before, to fill out any paperwork you need.”

“Fine. Now, let’s work up a plan for what you’ll look like so we both agree on the outcome before I get started.”

\* \* \*

At the front desk on her way out, Cassie made a return appointment for 3 p.m. Thursday. Once outside, she found a secondhand bookstore on the upper East Side and read a well-worn book on Manhattan neighborhoods. It stated there were abandoned railway tunnels just north of the newer tracks of Grand Central Station, running over thirty blocks north in an underground web from Third Avenue through Sixth Avenue:

Sociologists argue that New York’s homeless number in the hundreds of thousands. They are ignored by almost everyone unless they’re begging or otherwise making pests of themselves. Due to budget cuts, many have been turned out of the mental hospitals once housing them, where trained staff once cared for them. The homeless live in danger, sometimes killing one another over their meager possessions. Life among them is inherently dangerous.

The book was well over a decade old. If what it said was still true, she

could disappear there until she had surgery. Manhattan had vid-cams scanning the streets to detect crimes in progress, and wherever there was a camera, there was facial recognition software. She worried about being detected. If the agency knew where she was, their resident mole would try again to end her.

But, because the homeless weren't important, these tunnels might never be scanned by law enforcement. She'd be safer there. No one would suspect she was there.

She was glad she had the agency's basic coursework in self-defense and attack. *But if I sleep there, I'll be more exposed to dangers of attack and rape.* She shivered with the memory of being helpless as Abdul threatened to kill her while he used her body to satisfy himself.

To reduce the risks of living in the tunnels, she decided to sleep only during the daytime, on park benches in community parks such as the one she found at Union Square. She bought a large hat to cover her head and hide her face. Union Square Park was large, full of trees, and serene for such a busy neighborhood. She'd seen decent restaurants and fast-food places all around the park, convenient not only for meals but also for their restrooms.

After examining the park, she wandered four blocks down lower Fifth Avenue, and entered the lobby of The New School, where she ate in the cafeteria. It was refreshing to sit among students. She eavesdropped on their conversations. The nostalgia, remembering her college days at Stanford, left her feeling younger and energized.

Wearing her wide-brimmed hat, she returned to the park at Union Square. This city was so large, it was almost frightening. She shivered in the waning afternoon sun. Sitting on a bench, she watched people walking in and out of the park, wondering if any were from the Islamic extremist group that had tried to kill her. But by the time the sun set, she had relaxed and napped for over an hour. Cassie remembered reading the books on Manhattan restaurants, wondering now where a tourist might go for dinner. Her appetite was off, so she decided to find something cheap and full of calories. Her stomach grumbled. She hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours, and then it had been an energy bar.

She returned to the bus terminal and retrieved her homeless outfit, then walked to a Burger King she'd passed on 34th Street. Cassie scarfed down a

Whopper and used their rest room to re-dress in her homeless outfit. The underground tunnels were a mile walk from her location. Night enveloped her, walking along Madison Avenue. As rush hour ended, a chill set in.

Inside Grand Central Station, she took the stairs down to one of the Hudson and Harlem Line commuter train platforms and then jumped off at its northern end onto the train tracks. She took a deep breath before moving into the dark, but almost tripped on a railroad tie. The darkness was her first obstacle. She waited behind a dirty support girder until her eyes adjusted.

The flashlight she'd purchased lit her way as she walked the tracks for twenty minutes. Lights peeked from one of the unused tunnels heading west. She walked toward them. The flashlight unveiled a stream of homeless who led subterranean existences, some in settings they'd made quite elaborate. Many were armed with knives, a few even carried guns. She felt alert, fully adrenalized and wary but not fearful of those wandering around her.

Dressed in her homeless disguise, she didn't feel at all out of place. She was just as homeless as any of them.

Her nose wrinkled from the offensive odors of urine and decomposing garbage. The smell of unwashed bodies brought a wave of nausea welling inside her. She gazed into a dark, narrow passageway and let the stale air enter her lungs. It was worse than she'd expected.

Still not as bad as the dangers of the monitoring cameras on the streets, until she'd had a chance to alter her face.

Cassie shook herself and pushed forward, sticking on the tacky concrete. She stepped deeper into this wild and unknown place.

## CHAPTER 6

*June 14, 7:21 p.m.  
Train tunnels,  
Upper East Side, Manhattan*

At the first tunnel intersection she found three alternative paths. Straight ahead it was dark, and the flicker of the light from deeper corners farther away frightened her. To her right, the dripping of sewer pipes and the odor of sewage was overwhelming. She turned left, deeper into the maze. Here, she could smell fear. Something had recently happened, something terrible. She could feel the presence of someone, possibly the victim, or maybe the person who'd done the deed. She sniffed. Whoever it was must be close.

A huge, dirty man with wild hair, possibly about thirty years of age, approached her. He wore a stained red and black plaid flannel shirt. "New here?" he asked.

She examined him and sniffed the air. She gagged. "Leave me alone."

"Come on, I just want some companionship. How much will it cost?"

"Fuck you," Cassie replied.

"If you like. Want it bad, little girl, do you?"

Cassie took two steps back, away from the threat. She remembered being raped in Riyadh and her eyes closed to slits as she waited, shifting balance. When he closed the distance, she hit him with her palm, pushing it hard into his face. She heard the crunch of her hand breaking his nose. Blood gushed from his face.

He stepped back away from her, shocked, wiping the blood with his palm. "Bitch! You bitch! I'll kill you." He took another look at her but seemed to realize he'd be better off not trying again. He turned and disappeared into the dark, leaving her alone.

She watched him go, feeling a thrill run through her. *I will prevail.*

Cassie shook herself, wondering what she had already become.

She wandered into a busy corridor and sat resting on a carton. Time seemed to stretch on. Restless and nervous, she rose again and paced left at the next intersection.

There, sitting on a heap of garbage, was a young girl, probably just into her teens. The crying girl's clothes were ripped to rags, leaving nothing to the imagination. Cassie stared for a few seconds. "What happened to you?"

The girl looked up, her face screwed into an agonized frown. She sniffled. "My mom died two days ago. My brother Joshua and I were thrown out of our apartment in Brooklyn. We had no place to go. We met an old homeless man, searching for food in the garbage in the alley behind our building. He told us about the tunnels. Said this place was safer than the shelters. It took a day to walk here. We hadn't eaten since Mom died. I thought we'd be okay here."

Cassie offered her an energy bar. The girl ripped it open and swallowed it whole.

She stared at Cassie for almost a minute. "But just a little while ago, a big man came by. He tried ripping my clothes off. Josh tried to stop him. He snapped my brother's neck. Josh didn't have anything in his pockets when he died. We have no money. The man tore off my dress. He raped me." Tears poured from her. "Now I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do. First my mom and then my bro."

"And no cops around here," Cassie muttered. "Where's your brother's body?"

The girl pointed down the nearest alleyway. There he was, naked, bent in an unnatural pose. The girl pulled at her hair, torment and grief rocking her as she bawled. Suddenly she looked up, refocused her eyes directly at Cassie again. Pointing at Cassie, her jaw dropped. She blurted, "You were raped too! Not here. Not recently. But you were. I can tell."

Cassie gasped, then steadied herself. "Yes. I was violated, just like you." She felt pressure in her skull as if it was about to split in two. She shook her head. "I can't talk about it now." She took a deep breath. "The man who raped you, what was he wearing? A red plaid shirt?"

The girl nodded.

"I hurt him. But he's still around." Cassie reached into her pocket and

got out a few dollars. “So sorry. Here.” She handed the girl some money. “At least this will get you a few meals.”

She left the young girl and continued walking, haunted by the expression on the youngster’s face. She imagined the face of the unfortunate girl over and over.

She repeated the process the next day. She sat on a park bench in Union Square during the day then went to the abandoned train tracks under Grand Central Station at night. And she visited the homeless teenager.

On the third visit, it only took minutes after she appeared before the girl asked her in a soft, trembling voice, “What’s your name?”

The words came from Cassie’s mouth before she thought them through. “My name is Chrissie Card,” her old cover. Then she remembered she had no identity documents for “Chrissie Card.” She was now “Denise Hardcastle.”

The girl replied, “My name is Ann Silbee. I lived in Brooklyn. Bay Ridge. Colonial Road, across from Owl’s Head Park. Near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Mom and us in a tiny apartment.” Ann reached into the pocket of her tattered shirt and pulled out two crackers. She handed one to Cassie and ate the other. “Uh, Chrissie, how did you end up in the tunnels?”

Cassie found herself unprepared to answer. She chewed slowly, wondering, *what can I tell this young girl that is true but not too frightening?* She recovered, answered, “Some very bad people are trying to find me. I’m hiding here so they can’t.”

At that moment, Ann’s eyes mirrored acceptance and recognition. They had bonded. Cassie felt she could trust Ann. “Listen, Ann, I’d like to give you money. I have more than I need. Please. Let me help you.”

Ann frowned. “No. It doesn’t take long for someone to figure out what this place is like. After what happened to my brother and me, I know. What you want to do for me, it’ll only complicate things. Keep your money.”

Cassie raised her hand to interject, but Ann shook her head. “No. Let me finish. I heard a woman say she tried a shelter and was raped there. I might as well stay here.”

“What about foster care?”

Ann shook her head. “No. I’ve heard stories. Really ugly stories. Teens sold by the hour.”

Cassie nodded. “But there must be somewhere safer than this.”

Ann shrugged. "I think not. Leave me be."

What will you do to get food?"

"I'll manage. Keep your money. I'll do what I have to, to survive."

"But you know how dangerous this place is. I'm offering what I can afford, nothing more. I want to help you. Why refuse me?"

The girl rapidly shook her head. "No, no, no. I don't want anyone's help. If I take your help, anyone's help, I'll come to depend on them. What happens to me then? When they disappear? When you disappear."

Ann's declaration of independence stirred something deep inside Cassie. *She's like me in too many ways.* "I guess I understand."

Something unforeseen had happened. She saw this youngster as her guide and mentor in some disconnected bit of logic. *I need the knowledge Ann possesses more than Ann needs the money I can offer. Son of a bitch, she will survive. And so will I, if I follow her advice.*

Ann said, "Chrissie, don't come back. Please. I have to figure this out on my own. But before you go, please let me give you a hug. You've been kind to me."

When Cassie reached her arms around the young woman, Ann pushed something into her hand. Cassie examined it. It was an old bent photo of Ann. Maybe eight years old. Cassie smiled. "Thanks." She walked away, placing the photo into her wallet. But her thoughts kept returning to the young homeless girl who was as lost as she was.

\* \* \*

On the third day she bought a used business outfit at a Goodwill store and went to the YMCA at Third Avenue on 47th Street, where she paid for a day pass. She rented a locker for her homeless outfit and other possessions. Cassie showered and changed into the new clothing.

Before she left, she noticed that the Y offered self-defense and martial arts classes. She'd need to relearn her self-defense skills. She made a mental note of the class schedule and then hiked to Dr. Sheldorff's office to complete phase two of "Cassie Becomes Someone Else."

At his office, she thanked herself for thinking to stuff money from her Houmaz hack into Denise Hardcastle's bank account before leaving DC. She used most of her remaining cash to pay the doctor.



\* \* \*

Her face bore a bandage that covered both cheeks and her chin. As the anesthetic wore off, the pain burned like fires.

Cassie didn't want to find herself a target for another homeless bully while she appeared injured, and therefore weak. *I can't return to the Grand Central tunnels while my face is bandaged.*

She took a room with a kitchen at the Milburn Hotel on the Upper West Side. She spent the next two weeks recovering there from the surgery. For several days, despite the meds, her face was a wall of pain. Even breathing hurt. Room service at the hotel was nonexistent. She opened the door for pizza and Chinese food deliveries with her chef's knife hidden behind her back.

After a few days she felt well enough to walk the neighborhood and try the restaurants. The Thai café on the corner made her taste buds sing. Others were so good, as well, that she had a hard time deciding which ones she liked best.

On the day before her last visit to the doctor, she'd had all her clothes dry-cleaned by the hotel. When Dr. Sheldorff removed the bandages, he smiled. "Perfectly done. Here." He handed Cassie a mirror.

Cassie saw her new face, and her jaw dropped. What she saw staring back at her was the face she'd seen so many times in a picture frame hanging on the wall of her parent's house. Her face looked like her Uncle Misha's, with prominent cheekbones and a jutting chin.

She had become someone she hated.

Sheldorff's smile collapsed. "Is something wrong?"

She handed back the mirror. "No. I'm just surprised. The work you did is perfect, just as you say."

She was shocked to find that her new face was almost pretty, but in a way that revolted her.

She was down to less than one thousand dollars now, and needed to perform another hack or return to the tunnels.

She shuddered at the thought of returning to the tunnels. Ann had been her sole source for friendship and company, and she sorely missed the youngster. But Ann didn't want to see her ever again. Cassie took the photo from her purse and stared at it. Even if the girl didn't want to be with her,

Cassie felt herself drawn to her.

And, all things considered, she thought a hit team was less likely to find her while she lived in the tunnels. But just thinking about its desolation left her crestfallen. She shivered, remembering the violence there.

Cassie decided any hotel was safer—for her mental functioning at least—than the tunnels, at least until her money ran out. She remained at the Milburn. She dyed her hair red to further change her appearance. Cassie left the hotel only when she needed to, visiting wireless hot spots at coffee lounges and other more technology-oriented hotels. But she often gazed at Ann’s photo. Eventually, she bought a clear plastic credit-card holder to keep it from bending and ripping.

She sat facing the street at a Starbucks in East Midtown. While she recovered, she finished setting up her swiftshadow consulting.com website, hosted by a Chechnyan server.

She examined the web page with mixed regret and sorrow, frowning over her work. She’d wanted to emulate the father she loved, but her life had somehow gone askew. With every step she was now walking the path Uncle Misha followed. Worse yet, she was becoming good at it. That’s when she heard the voice in her head: *Tovarish, I am you, just as much as you are me. Vi ponimayu?*

The male voice spoke with a Russian accent. Although she’d never heard his voice before, she knew whose it was. Misha’s. She looked around the room but no one was close to her.

*Out of your league, tovarish. You’ll never survive without my help.*

Cassie couldn’t totally stifle her scream. “No!” Everyone in line for their designer coffee drinks turned to look at her. Crazy girl, mad. She heard the voice laugh, harsh and cruel.

\* \* \*

She paid for the website through five financial blinds she’d created. The blinds were foreign bank accounts she opened by hacking into banks located in countries hostile to the United States and not in compliance with global banking rules. She gave the bank accounts fictitious identities, so they were “blind” to anyone trying to find her. It took the blinds several days to draw funds indirectly from the numbered bank account she had

opened in Liechtenstein during a business trip to Europe two years ago. She'd placed a small amount of cash in that account when she opened it. She'd need to top it off soon by hacking agency funds.

In blazing red on black, the top of her web page declared, "Dirty Deeds, But Not Dirt Cheap. If you know how to contact us, we'll do your bidding. References on request with retainer of 50% in advance." No links and an invisible web address. At the bottom center of her web page was a hidden "hot spot" where clients could be instructed to click to open a window and leave a reply to their invitation email message by hitting the Ctrl-Alt-S keys all at the same time.

Cassie was ready to troll for clients. The file she'd stolen from the agency listed all the contact information for every client she'd ever had, and every other consulting firm the agency used as cover for operatives.

Cassie sent each a personalized email announcement of her new business, with a short but custom-tailored personal message identifying her, not by name but through an event she'd shared with that particular client.

She was now open for business.

Anyone out there?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 7

*June 19, 2:14 p.m.  
Milburn Hotel,  
242 West 76th Street,  
Manhattan*

Rain whipped the street in sheets. Cassie sat at the window, staring outside.

Ann's photo was propped on the table where she could see it. People carried umbrellas and walked in the midafternoon, while she idly noted the change in spring fashions. She'd worked nonstop since before dawn.

Cassie hadn't felt like getting dressed. She also hadn't bothered washing, or even brushing her teeth. She used her cell phone, focused on her work as she occasionally glanced out at the street, then returned her attention to the cell's screen. All business, totally focused, ignoring the voice in her head that told her not to bother trying, because she was going to die soon.

She plucked the thumb-drive containing her hacking tools and the lists of clients, banks, and their associated accounts from her attaché case. As the day passed, she used the tools to hack first into the Central Bank of Pakistan and then into one of the agency's client government accounts. She ran a program she'd written in C++ to institute a Domain Name System cache poisoning attack. While the bank's computers feebly fended off her attack—called pharming—she stole \$2,000,000 in small odd-numbered amounts never exceeding the equivalent of US\$5,000 per transaction. Her program piggybacked the stolen funds on top of her former agency's daily transactions, then on out to a chain of intermediary bank accounts at several European banks where the agency did its business. The program could execute ten electronic funds transfers per second, but setting up the endpoint bank details took time before she safely let the program run loose.

The piggybacked transfers were embedded into those the agency made, so they rode free and untraceable into the United States, arriving laundered in the largest and most prestigious domestic banks such as Citi, J. P. Morgan-Chase, and Bank of America. Once they arrived, she immediately converted the funds to bitcoin, an anonymous transaction format, and downloaded the serial numbers. There was no way to trace the funds now.

She'd always found hacking dull and repetitive. Her face—the face of her uncle—remained blank and focused on the screen. She needed the money, they had the money, and she did what her former employer taught her. No guilt. Just another job. The agency had taught her to steal, and she'd become good at it. She thought for a moment how people cheated on their taxes all the time. Cassie modified the methods the agency had trained her to use, to draw less attention to them. She smiled when it occurred to her she funded herself exactly the way she'd funded the agency. Only now it was personal, not business.

As day passed into dusk and then into evening, she moved some of the money—just what she required for her immediate needs—to Hardcastle's new account at Citi.

While she waited for a response to the twenty email messages she'd sent in a cold troll for clients, she built another dozen identities. Just before midnight, she fell into bed and a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

When she woke the next morning, she downloaded her bank statement and confirmed the funds had cleared into her checking account. The sun beamed on Cassie through the window, warming her. She walked outside and used an ATM terminal near the Milburn to withdraw some of the cash.

She took a series of buses to the Best Buy at 86th and Lexington. Cassie purchased a rolling suitcase, a DVD reader/writer, a computer printer, inkjet cartridges, and various sorts of paper, paid for in cash. During the short trip, she often looked behind her and to her flanks, nervous someone might be following her. But, as she concluded her final surveillance detection route at the bus stop, she relaxed. No one was tracking her; Cassie had seen no teams and no individuals more than once.

She considered the possibility that she was safe, for now. Just another person lost in a crowd.

Early the next morning, Cassie searched the files of the thumb-drive. Some of the contact names there might be tightly monitored by the agency. She couldn't decide whether the information was safe, even with all the security considerations used to cover her identity.

But the intel was still fresh and using it now offered less risk than if she continued to hold it in reserve. She searched the thumb-drive for employees of federal agencies. Given enough motivation in the form of cash, she hoped to obtain blank passports and US currency paper.

Cassie walked to a pay phone she had never used before, on the corner of Broadway and 76th Street. *I'll need the help of a of the Federal Reserve Bank employee, one the agency uses.* Norman Cisco's office was at one of the Federal Reserve's annex buildings across the street at the corner of Broad and Wall Streets. They'd worked together three times over two years whenever she needed the name of a "friendly" bank account to transfer funds to Muslim extremists. "Norm? This is Cassandra Sashakovich. I just need a minute of your time."

"Sashakovich? I heard you're dead." She could hear him snicker as his chewing gum popped.

"Not yet. But there are people out there who want me in the ground. Isn't there a pay phone on the corner of Broad Street and Wall Street?"

"Yeah. I assume you don't want this call on my records. What number should I call to reach you?"

Ten minutes later, Norm and Cassie were both at pay phones several blocks away from each other, not wanting to be seen in each other's company. The pay phones were located where they could talk without worry about security. "Norm, I'm willing to pay you big time for a favor that's illegal. Nothing worse than what either of us has ever done for the agency and our government."

"What favor and how much?"

"I need blank US currency paper and currency ink. Two-hundred fifty sheets, unfolded and enough ink to cover that. I can give you \$50,000. Interested?"

"Not for a piddling 50K. How about 200K?"

Cassie thought about her money. It wouldn't last forever, and if she

kept spending cash at this rate, it wouldn't last long at all. "75K."

"Don't be stupid, Sashakovich. I'm risking my job and my pension, not to mention a prison sentence. I'm cheap at 200K, especially since I can guess why you need the stuff. Tell you what, if you come back to me needing more, next time it'll be half price." She imagined Norm's sadistic smile.

"Norm, I need to survive for there to be a next time. How about 125K?"

He seemed to consider this offer for a few seconds. "Nope. I'll do it for you for the bargain price of \$150,000. And that's my final answer, as some ancient asshole celebrity was fond of saying on the telly."

Cassie sighed. She wished she had better negotiation skills. "Done deal. During lunch tomorrow, I'll call you at this pay phone at noon."

"Not so fast. I'll need to arrange a visit to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Long Island City. That's three hours out of my day. Can't have the goods for you before the day ends."

Cassie agreed. Norm always used an old-fashioned "dead-letter drop." The Soviet spies had made this method popular over forty years ago. He instructed her to place an envelope containing the cash in a waste bin outside the global headquarters of Citibank on 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Cassie hid in the lobby of an office building across the street and used her cell phone to video his pickup of the cash, just in case. When he'd gone, she visited the very same trash bin and found the locker key he'd left her in a large envelope. She found Cisco's "gift" in a locker at Penn Station, just as he'd promised. Now Cassie had the paper and the ink she needed.

She'd remembered an agency analyst complaining that the Secret Service monitored websites in unfriendly nations but couldn't do anything about the myriad offshore sites with instructions on counterfeiting. From that long-ago discussion, she found a plethora of information on counterfeiting currency, including an underground eBook on BitTorrent that contained details rarely found outside the US Treasury and specialty numismatists. She also found instructions on simulating real currency using Photoshop, including high-definition currency images and special programs to randomize the serial numbers.

She took buses to the Best Buy at 86th and Lexington where she purchased a high-quality scanner and two printers—one was dye sublimation and the other was a dot matrix preprinted-form printer—and

went to work. Over the next two days, she printed fresh bills on the dye sub, and ran them through the dot matrix without a ribbon to simulate the raised feel left by a real bill's intaglio printing process.

To finish the process, she bought some India ink and made several pots of strong Lapsang Souchongsouchong tea. She combined these liquids, and "aged" the bills by tossing them and the fluid in a garbage bag, then drying them with a hair dryer until they looked like they'd been in use for a few months. She spent two days crumpling the bills to wrinkle them.

Three days later, she had \$2.5 million in counterfeit currency, bills ranging from 20s to 50s. All would pass muster with the city's corner fruit stands. She was sure no one scanned for anything less than 100s.

It was more than she could fit in a suitcase.

Cassie needed identification papers that would pass muster at customs, but the hustlers in East Harlem offered poorly crafted false IDs that might get minors into bars but could easily expose an ex-agency analyst with a burn notice.

She had the name of someone at the US State Department who was the agency's New York City contact for blank passports. It cost \$50,000 of the counterfeit cash to purchase twenty blanks.

She also purchased the blank paper stock used for Social Security cards, and more blank stock for New York State drivers' licenses.

Nothing came cheap to forgers. She paid for everything with almost \$700,000 of counterfeit money. These vendors were the test of whether her counterfeiting efforts were adequate. They were.

She drew some of the laundered funds from her numbered account. But Cassie knew the amount of activity she was forcing through the offshore account might make it a trap for her, attracting investigation by foreign central banks and governments.

*Move the cash somewhere safer.* She opened an investment account online and slowly migrated the funds into it. She used the money to purchase US 90-day Treasury bills, and took loans from several New York banks using the T-bills as cash collateral.

One of her fake IDs netted her a three-day gig as a substitute teacher in an elementary school in the East 30s. She appeared at the school as a white-haired arrogant woman with a sweet spot for young children and wearing out-of-fashion clothes. As she entered the public school she examined her



reflection. Holding her head high as she walked, stiff and formal, the smile she let loose when she saw the children was genuine.

The principal met her in his office and pointed to a chair in front of his desk. “Well, Ms. Cawdry, I see you’re certified to teach kindergarten and first grade. We have temporary openings in both. The kindergarten assignment is only for a few days, since Ms. Coultrane is just out with the flu. However, if you’d prefer a longer stint, our first-grade teacher is going out on pregnancy leave next week and we could move you into that position right after. What’s your pleasure?”

Cassie sniffed the stale air. “Let’s try the kindergarten assignment and after it ends, we’ll talk about the other.” Cassie had no intention of becoming a teacher. As a temporary teacher, she’d be no more than a baby sitter. No need to worry about the impression she left with the toddlers.

Three days would be long enough to gather DNA and fingerprint samples from the class of six- and seven-year-olds. If she ever needed to deceive authorities as to the identity of someone who’d committed a crime, she could use their fingerprints and DNA. The voice of Uncle Misha chuckled in the back of her head.

\* \* \*

Three days of babysitting toddlers was enough time for her to gather the DNA samples. She’d enjoyed it, but she had work to do. But when she was back at the Milburn, Cassie stared at the plastic-coated photo of Ann. It reminded her of how brave Ann must be. The youngster’s determination to survive provided Cassie with an example she was determined to emulate. *Someday, she vowed, someday I’ll return and take you with me to somewhere safe. Someday. But first I have to save myself.* She placed the photo back into her pocket and sipped a cup of Starbucks’ best.

Ann hadn’t wanted her to return, but this was something Cassie couldn’t abide. Staring at the picture of Ann wasn’t enough for her.

Cassie finally gave up trying and left her room, took the elevator down to the lobby, and walked into a wall of humid heat. She took the bus south and east to Grand Central and entered tunnels, at first promising herself it was to be just that once.

But she went back a few times every week and brought the teen food,

clothing, and cash. She searched each time for hours until she found Ann. And each time, Ann reluctantly accepted the food and clothing, but only took the cash if it was less than fifty dollars. The first time Cassie pressed a stack of Franklins into her palm, she told Cassie, "Taking this much might make me think you're there for me. No one is there for any of us. Not even you."

One time, Cassie spent several hours with the teen, just talking with her. Ann was filled with grief over the loss of her entire family. She said, "I still see Joshua, whenever I walk past where he died."

Cassie couldn't comprehend the depth of anguish Ann felt. She nodded but couldn't find words.

Ann shocked Cassie, asking her, "What did you do, Chrissie, for your work? Before you got into trouble? I know you're not like the rest of us, living here in the tunnels. I can tell you're better than the rest of us. What did you do? What did you really do? Don't lie to me."

Cassie thought over the request for almost a minute. Ann wasn't a threat. Anything she said to her would stay with her. "I'm no better, Ann. I'm more foolish than I should have been. But you're right. I have a lot of formal education. I worked for the government for a few years, but they made my life so dangerous I had to flee or risk death. My real name isn't even Chrissie. It's Cassie. Nothing about me is what it seems. My entire life is nothing but lies. And I remember your advice: we all have only ourselves to depend on. It was the best advice I've received in many years. Behaving that way, though, it's made me lonely. Aren't you?"

At this, Ann's expression moved from shocked to smiling. She held out her hand. "Yes. Then you really are one of us. I'm happy to call you my friend."

But when Cassie started showing up almost every day, Ann drew the line. "Cassie, please let me be. I'm beginning to like you and trust you. It's not good for me. Please don't ever come back unless I can count on you forever. We both know I can't."

Reluctantly, Cassie left Ann alone after that, thinking that no one was truly "there" for either of them. The voice in Cassie's head told her it was a lesson she'd find true. Once again she was left with only Ann's photo for strength.

\* \* \*

Cassie paced the room for hours at a time while she waited for replies to her email blast looking for consulting work. She tried to focus on her future, but kept sliding into memories of her past. Her dreams filled with nightmares of Evan, Abdul, and McDougal's phone call terminating her employment. She'd been taught at The Farm to manage her emotions, and she'd done well before Riyadh. No longer. She had no idea why she couldn't force focus, and worried about this inability leading her into danger.

She visited the YMCA on Third Avenue at 47th Street early one morning and paid a day fee to take a course in self-defense taught by a woman named Judy Hernandez. When she arrived, she felt her stomach tossing, and with it, some nausea. She ignored this and plunged into the martial arts maneuvers. The activity took her mind off her problems, and she was able to center herself after that.

When she arrived back at the hotel, she found a reply to her email blast announcing her consulting business. Out of fifty-six emails she sent, just one came in, from the Chief Financial Officer of a publicly traded Silicon Valley company, Stillwater Technology Corporation.

She'd never heard of them, or their CFO. Cassie fretted, pacing her room. Maybe this was a set up. Maybe not though, and it only took one client to begin building a reputation.

In the email, Katherine McCandless stated she'd been referred by one of their vendors in the Far East. Cassie had no contacts there. She did some research on Stillwater. After thorough examination, she found both Stillwater and McCandless were legit. The email mentioned the company's CEO believed "some of our confidential high-tech research was stolen by a Hong Kong-based competitor. We want your company to locate and destroy that research, all original copies with our corporate letterhead, and all the copies that might have been made, both paper and electronic."

Cassie nodded and smiled. Here was a real test of her ability to complete an independent black op. She hesitated, considering the many risks, but her desire to not remain a victim won out. What excited her even more was the chance to stop being a thief, forger, and liar.

This was serious work. Cassie stood tall. Her sense of pride welled up. She even tried to force herself to grin into the mirror, but the tension

reflected back at her.

Cassie replied in email:

We're interested. Fixed fee of \$500,000. Send \$250,000 retainer via EFT to the offshore bank account with the following account number and SWIFT code...

What a stroke of good fortune. Maybe she had a future as a rogue financial operative.

Most of the work Cassie intended could be done from anywhere in the world, but it was always possible a client might need something done requiring her presence in a particular spot. She judged this assignment dangerous.

While she waited for a reply, Cassie focused on refresher courses in martial arts at the mini-dojos within the Y. A tall, thin, bald, black man, specializing in aikido, ran her ragged. The woman who had taught her a one-day course the previous week made no secret of being gay. Judy Hernandez was built like a fireplug, shorter than Cassie, and weighed at least forty pounds more, all of it muscle. Hernandez specialized in jujitsu. Cassie practiced hard and learned fast. In two days she'd picked up a handful of valuable martial arts tricks to supplement what she'd learned at The Farm.

\* \* \*

"We have her location." The disembodied voice on the cell phone had a distinctly Middle Eastern accent. "We're on our way right now, to get her."

Ten thousand miles away, the bearded man smiled. He paced outside the upscale rambling mansion northeast of Riyadh. "Remember, don't kill her until you have the intel. It's essential we know what she knows. Call me again when she's gagged and trussed. I want to say goodbye."

\* \* \*

Cassie hit the ground and bounced, with Judy standing over her. She lifted herself up, feeling pain in her backside. At least this was the only time she'd been tossed today. She'd come up to speed in tactical and operational

hand-to-hand combat moves and believed she might stand a chance against a stronger opponent.

Her cell phone buzzed with an incoming email, indicating that the retainer funds had arrived in her numbered account.

She scanned the screen and smiled. *Here goes everything.* She turned off the email application on her cell and looked at her wristwatch. 4:45 p.m. Cassie touched Judy's shoulder. "I'll be gone for a while. Maybe three weeks, give or take. Thanks for your help and encouragement. I'll see you as soon as I return."

*A fresh start.* She almost danced back to her hotel room.

\* \* \*

The van was stuck in Midtown rush-hour traffic. In the back of the van, three men wore trench coats to hide the AK-74s holstered within, holding ski masks ready to pull over their faces. The driver cursed in Pashto. "Fucking traffic. It's worse than Bangkok."

One of the men in the back of the van tapped his shoulder. "Relax, Sayed. She'll be there when we arrive. If she isn't, we'll just break into the room and wait for her."

The driver stopped the van before it rolled into the taxi sitting still in front of it. He turned his head. "What if she sees us before we see her? Eh, Hamid?"

Hamid shook his head and muttered about the will of Allah.

Fifty feet in front of them the light turned green and the van crept forward again.

\* \* \*

Cassie packed her attaché case and used the Internet to find freighters leaving the Port Authority of New York bound for Hong Kong. Next boat out was 7 p.m. from the 46th Street pier. From what she'd learned at The Farm in a class session called "Preparing for an Operation," she made a mental checklist of the things needed for the trip.

She walked to an Army-Navy surplus store near the Chelsea area on Tenth Avenue and bought items she'd need, including an inflatable life raft and life jacket, canvas boat shoes, three bathing suits, a large waterproof

bag, Dramamine patches, a large supply of freeze-dried food packs, and water bottles.

She walked twenty blocks northeast and deposited the remainder of her belongings into several lockers at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The voice in the back of her head yammered, and she tried to drown it out. It shrieked, telling her how dangerous this would be, reminding her she'd be without support.

Back at the hotel, she told the clerk she was leaving. She paid with counterfeit bills, then went back to her room for her travel bag. She didn't bother to clean the room of the papers she'd printed. The cleaning crew would take care of that tomorrow morning.

\* \* \*

Three men in ski masks bounded up two flights of stairs and silently walked the hall to the room they'd been told was Cassie's. Sayed knocked on the door, prepared to claim he was sent by the front desk. But there was no answer, and after trying twice more, he slipped a credit card between the door's frame and its latch to spring it open.

He cursed. The room was empty. They searched the room. In less than a minute, he was holding her itinerary. "She's at the 46th Street pier. Hurry."

\* \* \*

When Cassie arrived at the West 46th Street pier where the freighter—the *Soochow Dragon*—was berthed, she found several barrels on the dock. She used one as cover while she waited patiently for the sunset.

The pier darkened, making the freighter look older. Its stacks emitted soot, creating the air of a noir film. She could smell a mélange of ocean barnacles and the stench of diesel exhaust.

She pushed fear away as she crouched behind the barrels. Scouting the night watchmen and their patrol routes, she timed the seconds for them to complete their routes. Scanning the boat's bridge, she learned the bridge staff's watch profiles. The night watchmen walked the pier by the boarding gangplank every seven minutes. *I'll need to move fast between the seven and eight minute mark for the dock-side watch.* The bridge crew of the

*Soochow Dragon* walked past the receiving end of the gangplank at nine minutes, so she'd have to move on the stroke of seven and be hidden within the ship before nine. Cassie used her cell phone to record the start and end times, looking for discrepancies in their patterns and finding none.

Uncle Misha's voice in the back of her head kept screaming, *this is dangerous. More dangerous than Riyadh.* She shrugged and took a deep breath.

\* \* \*

The van screeched to a halt at the entrance to the pier. The driver stayed inside, to keep the vehicle from being stripped by roaming gangs. Three others sprinted down the pier, looking for the *Soochow Dragon*.

\* \* \*

As Cassie took a deep breath and made her move, the squeal of nearby braking traffic drew the attention of the watch crew. Her boat shoes were silent as she ran up the gangplank and onto the ship, keeping low to the ground. She looked around as she neared the top of the gangplank, familiarizing herself with the ship. Cassie sprinted to the davits cradling one of the lifeboats, and dove under the boat's canvas cover. *I'll be safe here for the next twenty-four hours, until tomorrow night when the boat is far away from the harbor and on its route through the Panama Canal.*

\* \* \*

Two hundred feet away, as a tug moved the boat from the pier, one of the hunters pointed to a human form dropping within the davits on the upper deck. "That's her."

Sayed thought, *yes, and we're seconds too late.*

Hamid pulled a sniper rifle from the canvass bag on his back and assembled it. In seconds he was searching through its night scope.

Sayed shook his head. "Don't. In the dark, you'll likely miss as the ship moves with the tide. Even if you kill her, we couldn't confirm it. We'll get her when the ship docks in Hong Kong. Let's go to JFK."

\* \* \*

Covered by the canvas, Cassie smiled. *I've done it! Successfully obtained transit to my objective.* The voice in the back of her head stopped suddenly but she still felt her heart slamming in her chest, her lungs struggling. She sat squat on the floor of the lifeboat and focused on normalizing her breathing. Slowly, her heart calmed. Cassie opened the self-inflating raft to use as a mattress.

She woke hours later when her stomach lurched despite the acclaimed Dramamine patch. She was forced to stay in the shelter and safety of the covered lifeboat.

Just after dawn, she peeked from under the canvas covering her lifeboat. Her hands fumbled through the attaché case for one of the plastic bags she'd brought to catch everything her body eliminated, but it was too late. She dry-heaved again and again into the lifeboat, at last bringing up a small amount of partially digested food, and clumsily missed the bag.

Her nausea disappeared in less than an hour, despite the smell from her vomit in the bottom of the boat.

She became ravenous beyond her imagination. But she'd allocated every one of her meals on this ten-day trip. All she had were freeze-dried ration packs and water. And she hadn't planned enough food for her to throw any up or to snack beyond a given meal.

As the hours passed, the sun heated everything under the canvas, including her. The stench of her cooking vomit, mixed with her own body odors, became unbearable. *I can't leave until night.*

Cassie waited, perspiring, concealed within the lifeboat until the changing of the night watch. Sometime well past midnight, under cover of darkness, she opened the canvas and emerged into the steamy tropical air. Not much cooler outside. At least it didn't smell. Cassie moved to the next lifeboat. *There are eight of these. Now I only have seven left to use.*

She rose with the sunrise the next morning, queasy again. Her stomach retched, spewing vomit again. And it happened the next morning, and the next morning—nausea followed by a craving for food. She was running out of clean lifeboats but at least she was managing to puke into a plastic bag.

Cassie knew from her high-school surfing days in Half Moon Bay that in rough seas she could become seasick. But the seas weren't that heavy. She wondered why the damn Dramamine patch wasn't working. They'd never failed until now. Besides, she'd been at sea for several days and



should have become adjusted to the shifting ocean. *I wonder if it's the high level of sodium in the food rations? Could the food have gone bad?* Unfortunately, it was all she had to eat. And she was troubled by the possibility that there was some other cause.

She only left the lifeboat at night, when the crew was short-staffed. From her experience the safest time to move was between 2 a.m. and 2:30 a.m. Then she'd empty the plastic bag she used to collect her vomit, urine, and defecation. She counted the days, remaining silent and uncomfortable in the unbearably humid heat.

\* \* \*

Two weeks after embarking, Cassie saw the lights of Hong Kong, right on schedule. She changed into a fresh bathing suit and packed everything except the life jacket and the life raft into the waterproof bag. She donned the life jacket and grabbed the overfull bag and life raft. Cassie waited, ready to disembark as the boat closed on the harbor.

As the crew met in the port section of the ship's forecabin with the harbor master and secured lines from the tug to the boat, Cassie moved through the shadows aft and to the starboard side of the boat. Misha's voice in her head screamed danger as she silently ran just short of the propeller wash, where she thought she couldn't be seen.

But one of the crew spotted her and yelled an alarm. She jolted and then recovered, smiling at the crew member. "Adios and thanks for the ride." Cassie jumped clear of the ship into the dark waters, thirty feet below.

The cool water of the South China Sea shocked her body, a deep contrast to the oppressive air. She bobbed to the surface with her inflatable bag and raft floating alongside her. The CO2 cartridge finished inflating the raft and Cassie climbed aboard with her bag. She paddled with her arms, aiming the raft toward the shore, far away.

\* \* \*

In the Hong Kong alleyway, they had a clear view of the pier. Hamid watched the ship as it entered the harbor. He signaled Sayed. "When the ship docks and she gets off, shoot her but don't kill her. Shoot both her legs, so she can't run. We need to learn what she knows before we dispose of

her.” Sayed nodded as he screwed the night scope onto the Dragunov sniper rifle. Hamid thought, *it will be an easy shot, two blocks from the pier.*

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## CHAPTER 8

*July 6, 9:11 a.m.*

*Stanley Beach, Hong Kong*

Just before dawn she reached landfall and staggered onto the beach at Stanley, near Repulse Bay, dragging the raft behind her. Her arms and legs ached and burned. The street was empty in the hours before sunrise. For just a second, she turned to watch the tug push the *Soochow Dragon* toward the harbor piers, several miles away. Squeezing air from the raft, she compressed it, folded and placed it in the bag, along with the life jacket. Cassie pulled the straps from the bag, converting it into a backpack, belted it over her shoulders, and set off toward the city.

She walked until she found a dark narrow alleyway. It was empty, stinking of garbage. A chorus of rats skittered away from her. She cursed her fates at being forced to live in shadows.

In the disappearing darkness she stripped off her bathing suit and changed into street clothes. She removed her passport and travelers checks from the bag, along with a small expandable rolling suitcase. Cassie placed everything into it.

Last, she took a deep breath.

\* \* \*

As the ship docked, the assassins waited. But an hour passed and Sashakovich hadn't left the ship. Sayed shook his head. "Where is she?"

Hamid frowned. "Don't know. We'll wait. She has to show."

It wasn't until noon when Hamid realized what had happened. "I have to tell our employer we've failed."

Sayed scratched his head. "And then what?"

"We wait in this forsaken place until new orders come."

\* \* \*

Cassie could see massive Victoria Peak and decided to walk along the shore. She found Stanley Main Street and headed west. The hike to downtown Hong Kong seemed endless. As she approached the city, modern, tall, sleek skyscrapers surrounded her and crowds grew thicker. She strolled through the streets, reveling in the wonderful aromas that emanated from the street vendors and restaurants of the city. Near the Maritime Museum she stopped at a rolling cart and used her counterfeit US currency to buy a *char siu bau*, a steamed sweet pork bun. *Yum. Real soul food.*

Morning rolled into rush hour. The streets of the financial district jammed with noisy people, more crowded and noisy than her recollection of Stanford's stadium during a crucial football game. Cassie pushed her way to a small newsstand and bought a map of the city and surrounding areas. The map listed hotel advertisements along borders of its page. She flagged down a taxi and headed toward Nathan Road, where she could pose as a tourist.

At 8:30 a.m. she stood in front of the large, busy Newton Hotel on Electric Road. She would use it as a base of operations for her brief visit. The hotel claimed it was close to the MTR—mass transit—station on Fortress Hill, with easy access to places she might need to go.

She checked in. Some English-speaking tourists in the well-decorated mirrored lobby were arguing about their choice of tours. Those close enough to smell the acrid stench of her unbathed body walked away and spoke to each other in hushed tones. The hotel clerk didn't seem to care or notice that her passport bore no entry stamp, probably due to the counterfeit US\$100 bill she had placed within the passport.

In her tiny room, she removed the puke and sweat-stinking clothing she'd worn. She thought about tossing the clothes into the trash, but decided to have them dry cleaned by the hotel. As she stripped, the odors coming off her body were so strong it made her sick. She dropped the garments into a plastic bag and knotted it.

Her room had a private bath, and she enjoyed her first shower in nine days. Scrubbed herself for almost forty minutes until she was sure she no longer stank. Passing by the mirror as she got out of the shower, she was surprised to see her breasts were larger, and her nipples larger and darker

than they'd been before she left New York. Cassie had several padded 32A bras, none of which fit. Rather than enlarging them by cutting the padding from them, she decided not to bother with one. She often missed periods and guessed now one might be about to start. This sometimes caused her breasts to swell. But she admired herself in the mirror. She'd always felt deprived, having no breasts, and now, suddenly, there they were.

She dressed in a casual outfit as clean as herself and placed the dry-cleaning bag outside her door for the hotel to process.

*I'm ready to work.*

Cassie sat at the desk and reviewed her notes. The trade secrets she sought had been hacked right out from her client's own servers. It wouldn't have been difficult for a decent hacker to do this.

Although it would have been easier for an insider to steal paper or electronic records while on site, she didn't believe this was probable. She'd found no electronic traces leading from their servers to the Silicon Valley "Mae West" facility in San Jose, which coordinated all Internet telecommunications going into or out of the West Coast to the Far East, including Hong Kong.

Therefore, Hong Kong was where the hacker did his work. Even with her client's tight network security, there were holes big enough to permit a professional to arrive electronically, undetected, scan the systems, and leave with copies of the documents.

It might be possible the hacker hired an insider, possibly an employee of her client. Someone whose job it was to monitor the network on the night the hack was done. The accomplice would erase all traces from the client's server. But it would be more dangerous to involve anyone else. No. Hackers almost always worked alone.

*Does the hacker live here in Hong Kong? Is there an insider helping the hacker? No way to know the answers.*

She put her cell phone in its case and hooked it to her belt.

Cassie left the hotel and walked the busy streets. Hong Kong seemed a mixture of ancient and brand new, but unlike Riyadh, the streets were more crowded than any city she'd ever visited, with the nonnatives speaking mostly English or German. A tide of noise followed her, voices and traffic. The sidewalk was so densely crowded that she found progress difficult and slow, at best, unless she moved with the human tide.

A Starbucks in downtown Hong Kong advertised a “pay as you go” wireless connection. Traceback from the Starbucks would be virtually impossible. Cassie entered, relieved to be off the steamy, congested sidewalk. She bought a latte and occupied a lounge chair where she could use the cell phone to vet the threads she’d discovered back in New York.

Scouring the Internet, she determined the hacker’s efforts had originated over a two-week period, ending sometime about three weeks ago. She found one of the hacker’s traces left behind with a few details he or she hadn’t erased.

She searched for a server address and an email address. *Success.* A bit more hacking and she determined the physical location of the server he or she used. *The New Territories, a short distance from my client’s competitor.* This led to more questions. *Who was the person who’d sold the stolen data to my client’s competitor? Would one of the competing company’s employees have had the audacity to hack the data?*

Cassie left Starbucks and looked for a pharmacy where she could buy some items she wanted before traveling back to the hotel. She walked down one of the store’s aisles and picked up a “Guide to Doing Business in Hong Kong.” Most of the signs in the pharmacy were in Chinese and English, but the signs for things a local would want seemed to be only in Chinese.

She found a sales clerk and tried to explain what she wanted to the clerk, but Cassie didn’t speak any dialect of Cantonese or Mandarin. Her area of expertise was the Middle East, not the Far East. The female sales clerk’s English was limited. Frustrated, she slowly used her hands to illustrate the things she wanted, but the sales clerk seemed unable to understand her.

Suddenly, the sales clerk’s eyes widened and she pointed to Cassie’s chest. Cassie looked down and saw small, spreading, seeping wet circles where her blouse covered her nipples.

The clerk’s hands mimicked a cradling motion. “Baby?”

Cassie caught the sweet and creamy odor emanating from her blouse and it added to her shock. This couldn’t be happening to her. Pregnancy was supposed to be a joyous event. But not for her. It was a nightmare. How could she be pregnant and lactating only ten weeks after the assassin raped her? Was lactation this early even possible?

*First Abdul tried to kill me, and then he leaves me pregnant.*

She vowed to research lactation on the Internet. Desperate, she searched for some way to quell the building panic.

She shook her head with regret and quietly answered the clerk's question, "I guess so. Yes." After seeing the breast milk seeping through Cassie's blouse, the store clerk brought Cassie a pregnancy self-test and a hand-operated Medela breast pump. Cassie steeled herself. She tried to quell her anger, forcing her disappointment down. A steely resolve built in her. She'd just have to find a way to look past her problems until she could fix them. *Shit.*

She obtained the items on her shopping list: a flashlight, several pairs of surgical gloves, a ferry and bus map of Hong Kong and the New Territories, and a fresh blouse. The pharmacy didn't sell nursing bras, but Cassie suspected her breasts were too small to fit one.

She found a dark alleyway on the way back to the hotel and changed her blouse, keeping the damp one for dry cleaning. She cried uncontrollably as she walked along Nathan Road.

Back in the hotel, Cassie read the instructions for the self-test and then confirmed her worst fears: she really was pregnant from being raped by the man hired to assassinate her. She sulked as she read the instructions for the breast pump. She continued sobbing as she expressed a small amount of milk from each of her breasts. Tears fell as several drops of her milk dripped through the pump.

Her nipples were excruciatingly sensitive. Would this be a continuing problem? Was this something other women in her family had occur so early in their pregnancies?

She wiped the tears on her sleeve. One bad day in Riyadh had ruined her life in so many ways.

Cassie walked to the bathroom sink to toss the milk. She sniffed the liquid. It had a strong, sweet, almost buttery but pleasant aroma, somewhat like a fine Gouda cheese. Cassie dipped her finger into it. She drank it, and her curiosity sated, a thought occurred to her. This might be a mixed blessing on the freighter back to the United States, if she ran out of bottled water.

She was starting to hate herself.

Was there an upside? She realized lactation would motivate her to closet herself. It could be useful. *Now I have a good excuse to remain by*

*myself. Who would want a lactating woman as a girlfriend?* Besides, anyone she met might be the next one trying to murder her.

She needed solitude until she could make sense of her future.

It was time to get to work. Cassie dressed in the darkest clothing she had, to keep from showing any subsequent leaks while she was outside the hotel. She couldn't decide whether to bring the breast pump or just a fresh blouse—the last one until the others were returned clean by the hotel. But she'd need to keep her reserve blouse clean until the remainder of her clothing was returned, so she stuffed the breast pump into the attaché case.

Cassie studied the map. She found the ferry building. Exiting the hotel, she took a bus to the ferry terminal and boarded the next boat to the New Territories. It was early in the afternoon, but she didn't feel at all hungry. Nor did she feel nauseous. It had been morning sickness on the freighter and Cassie realized she'd been too damn concerned with her survival to recognize its symptoms. *I've lost focus. I must not let that happen again.*

Her client's competitor was a short taxi ride from the embarkation point at the ferry terminal. As she walked from the boat, she battled tourists and business people for a taxicab. It took over an hour to get one. And only fifteen minutes to get there.

At her destination, she watched the empty taxi disappear from view before she began reconnoitering the area. She made her way around the building, sticking to the shadows, until she sighted the garbage bins the company used for paper trash. Looking inside one, she found they weren't using cross-shredders. It would be easier to reassemble paper back into sheets.

Before they'd fired her, the agency had completed its testing cycle for the "shred reassembler" computer program for Chinese printed text. She'd brought along the beta version of the program on a DVD. A decade ago, agency management demanded the program be created as a part of one of the appendices of "The New American Century" document.

Each of the bins was full past overflowing. She decided the trash hadn't been picked up for several days and maybe quite a bit longer. This was lucky for her. Making as little noise as possible, she opened the top of one of the large trash bins and slipped inside. She was thankful it contained only recyclable paper and emitted no odors.

Opening her attaché case, she took out the flashlight, turned it on, and



examined the paper scraps, both whole sheets and shredded pieces. She couldn't read Chinese. There was no way to guess which scraps of paper were important. After visiting all three bins, she left with the attaché case filled to bursting with paper sheets and paper shreds.

Cassie rode the ferry back to the city and stopped at a Starbucks for a cup of coffee to go. She found a copy center where she could piece together the document scraps in the attaché.

The woman she saw reflected in the windows was truly a stranger to the person she'd been before her visit to Riyadh. Cassie sighed and tried to accept who she'd become, knowing that if there was a future for her it would likely be very different from her past. She wasn't just going to think like a Islamic extremist. She was going to become whatever it took to save her own life. Her intention to survive—come what may—gave her a sudden surge of confidence.

Out from the restroom, she waited in line to use the copy center's computers and scanners. When it was her turn, Cassie removed the paper shreds from her attaché case and photocopied them. Then she scanned them into compressed TIFF computer image files. She used one of their computers to run the agency's stolen shred reassembler program. The program aligned the scanned images and arranged them into cohesive language. She saved the images as graphic image files before processing them through the program's optical character recognition protocols. Cassie gathered several hundred pages of Mandarin and saved them to the USB drive that had been embedded in her belt buckle. Then she erased the files and the programs from the copy center's computer.

The copy center employees waited for her to complete packing up before they closed for the night. She exited tired and hungry.

She was back the next day when they opened, and worked straight through the day until an hour before they closed at 6 p.m. Cassie finished processing the paper trash by running another program she'd stolen from the agency, translating Chinese into English. Now she had English translations of all the files and would know if anything in the trash could lead her to the stolen documents. She tossed the paper pages and shredded paper.

Cassie hadn't eaten much—just snacks at Starbucks—for two days. And she had eaten only emergency rations on the freighter. As she left the

copier center her stomach grumbled. She rubbed her famished belly and remembered the restaurant and lodging guide she'd bought at the pharmacy. She pulled it from her backpack. She wanted—no, she needed—an excellent meal to celebrate the modest successes she'd had so far. In the guide, she found a famous and expensive Cantonese gourmet restaurant, the Fook Lam Moon on Johnston Road, a short walk from her hotel. She decided to drop her computer files and equipment in her room before dinner.

She craved braised ginger shrimp in tomato sauce, her favorite Mandarin dish, and one she had prepared in her Washington apartment the last night she and Evan were together. She could almost smell the ginger root and sesame seed oil as she conjured it in her mind.

She'd remembered her mother's kitchen, where she started cooking before she was ten years old. She'd been good enough to enroll in the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, where she spent a year, but she couldn't stand the strong aromas of the ingredients before they were cooked. Her passion for cooking continued even though she dropped out of the academy and wound up at Stanford, excelling in the graduate economics seminars taught by her father, among many other professors.

The restaurant was a beautiful place, unmistakably Chinese in its decoration and use of red as its primary color. Already hungry when she opened the menu, her eyes grew wide at the myriad of appetizing choices available. The cuisine seemed to be a mix of high-end Cantonese. No Mandarin on the menu. Everything very expensive.

The waiter was older than her father, busy and curt. She asked, "What do you recommend?"

The old man slowed, then smiled. He said, "Your first time here?" She nodded and smiled back.

He said, "We are famous for Braised Most Superior Shark's Fin with Brown Sauce, Braised Abalone with Goose Web, Sautéed Fresh Lobster in Fook Lam Moon's Stock, and for dessert, we have Double Boiled Bird's Nest with Coconut Milk Inside Coconut. All are classic, fabulous dishes. What you want?"

She ordered them all. Sitting there alone, she considered the future and how challenging survival would be. Cassie decided to have an abortion. No way she could run for her life cradling the baby of the man who'd raped her

and tried to murder her. And, to seal the decision, she ordered a shot of Lagavulin sixteen-year-old single malt Scotch. She drank it in two quick swallows and ordered another.

The waiter arrived with enough food to feed a small family. “You likey these, I guarantee. Much goodness for you. And lucky too.”

Cassie was hungry; she tasted everything in a state of bliss and finished some of the exotic dishes. *So good!* It was the most expensive meal she’d ever eaten. She couldn’t remember ever eating a meal this fine.

She walked to the hotel holding a plastic bag filled with leftovers in take-home boxes, enough to last at least through the next day or two. Cassie placed the take-out in her room’s refrigerator and then set herself back to work, backing up the files from her belt buckle onto her cell phone. After midnight she crashed to the bed for a few scant hours of sleep.

She woke and drank coffee, then began reading the files she’d created from the paper shreds. Most of it she couldn’t understand and had no interest in, such as the role of the American Federal Trade Commission in guiding product design. She wondered if she would ever find what she needed. Her doubts increased along with her frustration, until she gave up for the night.

She took a bath to relax. Then bedtime. She dreamed of herself lying on a beach in Hawaii, warm breezes and pleasant floral scents.

The next morning she was back examining the information she’d collected, and there it was: mention of a large amount of petty cash needed for an unexpected expense approved by the Executive Vice President, Technology Development, for the 11 million RMB, equivalent to two million US dollars. She looked up the name of the EVP on the corporate directory from the company’s website and found his office’s exact location on the company’s directory map.

But the best find she’d gotten today from the shredded paper she’d turned into files was the name of the hacker, William Wing, from a personal note kept in a tiny file by the EVP. She shook her head at the sloppiness of the parties in this sordid affair. Cassie guessed they thought no one would come looking, and now they’d pay for their arrogance. Now she knew not only who, but also where.

She was off to Starbucks for another day of anonymous pay-by-the-minute wireless. The Starbucks counter woman recognized Cassie and

startled her, saying “Hello, missy. Good to see you again.”

Cassie wondered if it was safe to use the same Starbucks more than once, but shook it off and smiled. “This is a good place to spend the day.”

The counter woman smiled. “Soon we charge you rent.”

She and the other woman laughed.

Three hours and two café au laits later, she’d completed hacking into the competitor’s network from afar. She searched the network to determine if there were backup files and found another onsite server. From the primary and the backup, she deleted over 600 pages related to the stolen new technology from the company’s servers. To ensure she got paid for her work, she copied the files she’d deleted onto her belt-buckle storage device, with backup on the 64-gigabyte microSD card in her cell phone.

Her next task was far more dangerous, and Uncle Misha’s voice in her head yammered that she’d be in big trouble if she was caught. After hacking the EVP’s data files on their network, she’d have to enter the competitor’s office building and see if there were paper versions of the files kept there. If so, she’d need to steal or destroy them.

The agency had taught her how to enter a building covertly, locate physical property, either steal or destroy it without discovery, and leave the premises. It’s why her agency hacks were always done in-country. She took a deep breath, planning her visit.

The next step would expose her to real risk.

As the sun sank behind the city, she returned to the hotel, dressed for the black op in dark clothing and left with her cell phone and her toolkit. Cassie took the ferry to the New Territories, and then a taxi deep into the set of corporate parks.

The corporate headquarters of her client’s competitor was located across the street. The voice in her head was jabbering at light speed now, telling her to flee, but she dismissed it. She must complete her assignment. Now. She forced her attention on the lobby, her first and easiest objective.

She entered an unlit alley across the street from their building and positioned herself in darkness there. By 3 a.m., she’d determined the guard traffic patterns. Watched, waited. As one guard left to patrol and the other fell asleep watching a portable television, she used her bump key to enter the building.

She squirmed silently through the lobby doors, dropping to the floor

and crawling prone toward the guard's desk so she could use it as cover. The screaming voice in her head had become a headache, making her body sluggish in responding. She was suffused with the palpable fear of failure.

The roving guard's footsteps echoed closer to the stationary guard's desk. She dove for safety into the adjacent hallway as the guards stood together talking. Hyperventilating, she lay without moving for some time, fear her only companion.

Soon, the roving guard would begin his next tour. She rose up, and walked low to the floor through the halls. When the guards' voices became more distant she removed the printed copy of the building's map that she'd downloaded from the company's server.

Cassie peeked around the corner and examined the wall for security cameras. All the cams pointed along their horizontal axis. She determined a route where she could always be directly under one as she passed it. Walking with care, she explored the building, searching for the EVP's office.

It was exactly where the map depicted it would be. But, the door was locked.

She donned a pair of surgical gloves, opened her case of bump keys and selected the first one. Continuously shifting her focus from the lock to the sounds of the guards making their rounds, she tried one after the next.

A guard approached. She skittered silently across the hall and ducked into a nearby restroom. Hyperalert, she placed her hand over the door's edge to keep it silent as it closed. She waited a few minutes, then returned to the locked door.

One bump key after another failed to unlock the door. But, with only two left untried, she heard the click on the EVP's door.

Alone in the quiet of the office, she relaxed. *I'll be safe from the guard if I'm quiet and stay out of the doorway window's line of sight.* She opened one file cabinet after another, searching for the physical papers by comparing the Chinese letters on the paper to the screen on her cell phone displaying the pages she sought.

One by one, she gathered them, organizing the ones she needed by date, and stuffed them in her backpack.

As she walked toward the doorway to leave, she stepped on a bump of uneven carpet. What was this? She inspected it, finding its edges could be

lifted. Underneath, she found a small safe built into the tiles of the floor.

She shook the can of Freon she'd bought at a local computer store the day before. It was called "keyboard dust remover" but if she tipped it upside down, Freon would exit its tip instead of compressed air. Once it was coated, she hit the lock with the tiny hammer she'd brought, but the lock didn't shatter. *Hardened steel.* And she was now out of Freon. *I am so fucked.* She examined the safe's lock. It was a fingerprint scanner. *Okay, then.*

Cassie opened her backpack and removed a roll of clear plastic moving tape and a sheet of plastic from the laminator she'd owned when she worked for the agency. She placed the tape against the fingerprint scanner and pulled the oily fingerprint of the EVP from the scanner. He'd never wiped it clean and now she owned his print. Then she placed the tape on a piece of clear plastic and—voilà!—she had a usable print for breaking into the safe. She placed a small blank piece of paper between her thumb and the plastic to shield her own print from confusing the scanner, then pressed her thumb against the unit. The safe cracked open.

Cassie took everything she found within, and placed it into her backpack. She closed the safe's door, replaced the carpet, and smoothed it out.

With her search completed, she heaved a sigh of relief. She was so close now.

She tried to keep silent as she moved around the office, placing everything not associated with her hack back into its original location.

*Time to leave.*

The roving guard's footsteps! Cassie dropped to the floor and scurried behind a desk, making as little noise as possible.

But the guard must have heard something because he opened the office door. The voice in her head was wailing now. *You'll be caught and taken to jail, your picture matched to the files of criminals, then to all files, your identity will be exposed, the Islamic extremists will find out and come for you again. This time they'll kill you while you sit in jail. Idiot! Stupid little girl. What did you think you were doing?*

She took a deep breath to quiet the clamor in her mind and moved deep into the desk well. The guard's flashlight scoured the room, the file cabinets, the carpets, the walls.

But the flashlight shed no light deep enough to expose her. Cassie gulped, wondering if he could hear her breathing. She could smell her panic.

The guard turned and closed the door. As he returned to patrolling the office hallway, she took a deep breath. She waited two minutes, paralyzed, then finally rose. She closed the office door behind her. *Get out now!*

*No, not yet. First, destroy the paper files as I was ordered.* She found a paper shredder in the cafeteria. She entered and closed the door to give her privacy and muffle its sounds. Cassie destroyed the pages. The shreds went into her backpack.

Making no further sound, she slipped out of a side door of the building into the humid night.

She was drenched in perspiration and whispered aloud to herself, “Lucky girl. Can’t believe I ever thought to try this.”

Then she realized she was only halfway through her business for the night. *Crap!*

She found a dark alleyway where she could work with privacy.

Cassie used her cell phone to access the Internet and complete a reverse-lookup of the hacker’s name. She obtained not just the street address but also the apartment number. The GPS function also offered her directions to the hacker’s apartment in Ascot Heights, Block A. It was a two-mile trot to the residence at 21 Lok Lam Road, New Territories. It was 5 a.m. She walked as fast as she could and by 5:40 a.m. she could see the building. The streets were still dark and empty, providing cover. *Now I need a place to watch and wait.*

Cassie found another alley across from the hacker’s apartment in a residential neighborhood. She waited for a good opportunity behind a set of garbage bins. The smell was overpowering. She concentrated on keeping herself from giving in to the nausea building in her belly.

Around 6:30 a.m., people began emerging from buildings to go to work. By 10 a.m. the throng had turned to a trickle and then stopped completely.

Cassie walked until she found a pay phone and dialed the phone number associated with William Wing’s address and email. Three rings and a man’s voice, but, *oh yes, good, an answering machine.* Cassie would risk a visit. She double-checked the directory of his building. It confirmed

William Wing lived in apartment 204.

Cassie recognized the lock on the apartment's outer door. *Shit. Never tried to pick one of these before.*

She scoured her memory from her classes at The Farm and remembered the Raking Method. *It might work here.* She rummaged among the tools in her attaché case for her set of raking lock picks, never before used. Each one was constructed with a series of bumps, or diamond-shaped notches. This method was supposed to be fast. She “raked” the lock, running the pick over all the lock's pins at one time, trying to get the pins to rise into the open position and stay there.

It took over five minutes, but she was finally inside the front door of the building. The next barrier was the fire-stairs door into the main building on the second floor. This lock only needed a credit card. She slipped one between the latch and the door.

Cassie cracked the door from the stairwell into the hallway, and listened. No one walking, no one talking. She looked around and sniffed. Cooking smells. She gulped as the voice began to yammer again, telling her again that she'd be discovered and her life would end. Cassie took another deep breath and made her way to the hacker's door.

Her fear mounted like some monster alive inside her skin. What would she do if William Wing was home? She decided if the worst happened she'd say she sold magazine subscriptions, offering one of her false identity cards. She forced herself to believe that might be enough as she knocked on the door.

But no answer. She breathed a sigh of relief. Cassie worked on the door locks. Two locks, both difficult to crack. After ten minutes her picks popped the top lock.

Every noise she heard had her ready to scurry away. No one appeared on the floor to enter or leave an apartment, and if they had, she didn't know what she would do. Probably, she'd head back toward the elevator and take it to the lobby and start over after waiting an hour.

The lower lock was more difficult. The voice in her head jabbered nonstop. She almost had the lock open three times and it fell back each time. Her hand cramped and she shook it to loosen its muscles.

After almost half an hour, it snapped open. Cassie slipped inside the door, wondering what she'd do if she found someone there.



Food odors assaulted her. Wing cooked with garlic at home. The room reeked of marijuana, something she hadn't smelled since her days in a college dorm. She listened to silence and moved stealthily through the apartment, peeking around corners for someone who might be deaf and work from home. She was prepared to quietly back out and leave.

Examining the ceiling and walls for videocams, she found several. She pulled a chair from the kitchen and climbed it, removing one cam after another. Eight, and each had self-contained storage and no networking capability. *So far, things look good.*

She was almost sure she was alone. The voice in her head became quiet. As she walked into the living room, she heard a noise from the kitchen. Cassie ducked behind the couch and froze. Then she heard a noise above her. Startled, Cassie looked up, her hands already moving in a jujitsu move. A large calico cat peered down at her from the top of the couch. It meowed at her, sitting, watching her. Feeling great relief, Cassie took a deep breath and reached slowly to pet it.

Time was her biggest enemy now. She quickly completed reconnoitering the apartment. There were two desktop computers, one in the living room and one in the bedroom. Cassie searched the hard-disk directory of the one in the living room, and, yes, here were copies of her target files. *But maybe he modified them before sending them on to his client. I'll take a look later.* She copied all his files to the USB flash drive from her belt buckle, then unscrewed the case and removed both hard disks.

Her encore was to remove both hard disks from the bedroom computer as well. She searched the apartment for anything on paper corresponding to the assignment itself or the stolen documents, but found nothing.

*Time to leave.* She peeked out Wing's front door. No one there. She took a deep breath and waited for the voice in her head to jabber, but it remained silent. In seconds she was on the staircase heading out.

Cassie walked from the building and flagged a taxi to the ferry. She scanned traffic on her flanks and in front of her, stopping at the port's windows to use their reflective surfaces to see behind her. No one was following her. *Maybe it's safe for me now.*

But she remained wary as she boarded. The tension left her as she found a seat on the boat, deep within its bowels. She sat, her back to the wall, watching everyone. Midway back to Hong Kong, she opened her

attaché case and walked topside.

She tossed the hard disks and the shredded paper into the bay.

As the ferry completed its journey back to Hong Kong, she sat back and extended her legs. It felt good to relax, having completed the final phase of her assignment. Now, the only copies of the files were those she had in the USB drive in her belt buckle. A good insurance policy.

She stopped at Starbucks on the way back to the hotel and used the restroom. Her breasts ached and her nipples itched, so she searched the Internet for “human lactation” as she sat on the toilet. Yes, what happened to her was rare but possible. Even non-pregnant women could lactate. *Rats!*

She sighed in resignation.

Cassie prepared for her trip home. No need to return to her hotel. She used her cell’s wireless, finding several alternative freighters leaving for San Francisco within the next day.

Her first stop was a camping store where she bought dried food and bottled water. She stuffed herself into her black bikini under dark street clothing. Neither the top nor the bottom fit, but they were all she’d have available when she exited the ship she’d soon board.

Ready to leave, Cassie found a taxi, and headed toward the harbor.

*How long will I last, living like this? It’s too nerve wracking. Not bloody likely I’ll live very long.*

## CHAPTER 9

*July 16, 3:41 p.m.  
Agency headquarters,  
K Street, Washington, DC*

Gilbert Greenfield walked through Foggy Bottom, a freezing wind at his back. It took just a minute from the White House lobby to his waiting limo. The expression on his face was grim, but this was his usual expression, so he knew the driver wouldn't assume he had concerns.

Fifteen minutes later, he entered his intelligence service's lobby. He went through security and rode the elevator to the building's top floor. Entering his office, Greenfield wriggled out of his coat. He approached his secretary. "Ellen, get Mark McDougal up here soonest." She nodded as he entered his office.

Greenfield tossed his coat on the couch, dropped into the leather chair behind his desk, and began keying a document into his computer.

He heard a knock on his office door, looked up, and said, "Enter." He pointed to the couch and McDougal sank into the empty space next to the coat.

"Mark, I have a special project for you. If we still had Sashakovich, I'd ask you to assign this to her. It's right up her alley, but, well, that isn't possible any more. I think your best move without her is to obtain several subcontractors and assign each to do a piece of the work. Make sure none of them has enough of the pieces to guess the nature of the deliverable." He looked straight at McDougal as he spoke.

Greenfield preferred avoiding NOCs—contractors without official cover—for any assignment unless it could be done in pieces and reassembled into its final version. That way, none of the NOCs could understand the finished product. He stared back at Greenfield, waiting for

the mission to be outlined.

Greenfield said, “The West Wing has requested a global funds transfer network, with very specific endpoints. It’s urgent.” He looked at his computer screen. “We need a team working on this by the end of next week.” Greenfield pressed the mouse button and pointed to his printer. “Read it and leave it.”

McDougal reached and removed three printed pages. As he scanned them his mouth fell open. “Sir, it’ll be hard to keep any who see this from understanding. Are you sure there isn’t one of ours inside who can handle this.”

“I’ve just reviewed the staff roster. There’s no one. No one we can train fast enough. The three of Ainsley’s staff who know the slightest bits of banking aren’t in the same league as what we need. And no one who’s in Sashakovich’s league.” He grimaced. “Damn her. And damn those budget cuts. Well, at least it can be buried in our subcontracting budget.”

Greenfield watched as McDougal examined the short report again. McDougal said, “The available subcontractors don’t have enough horsepower. But there might be one, a one new independent contractor who might be good for this job. I’ll take care of it.”

Greenfield nodded. “Good.” He held his hand out and McDougal handed back the pages. As his subordinate left, the director mumbled to himself. “Damn. Project SafePay will be a bitch.”

\* \* \*

Cassie found the return trip on the freighter more tedious than her trip over, For over a week, pregnancy made her sick every morning. Often she became dizzy from vomiting. The ship rocked violently as it neared the Pacific coast.

San Francisco was close enough to San Jose to make delivery of her report a local email rather than 3,000 miles away from where she lived. She knew her client’s data processing function could determine the “send” point for her email and didn’t want them to know where she lived. And there were other reasons why she needed to be here. Using an abortion clinic here would further dilute the clues as to where she lived. And finally, she wanted the assassin’s fetus gone from her as soon as possible.

Rolling through the mid-morning fog, the freighter neared the California coastline. She recognized the tiny peaks of the Farallon Islands close to Half Moon Bay where she'd grown up. She knew sharks congregated to feast on sea lions sunning themselves on the rocky shoals. *Not a good idea to exit here.*

Cassie felt an ache in her heart passing so close to where her parents lived. It was likely the agency kept a watch on them and so might the people hunting her. But she stared at the cliffs of Devil's Slide, filled with a painful longing.

She readied herself to disembark the boat as it passed under the Golden Gate Bridge into the Bay near the Marin Headlands. These cold turbulent waters were still warmer than outside the Bay. She wished she'd brought a wetsuit, but it would have been too bulky and heavy for her to sneak aboard, toting it under her arm. She needed to get to shore within five or six minutes or she'd freeze to death.

As they approached Alcatraz Island and closed to within two hundred yards of shore, she cabled the raft to her wrist and dove with it into the frigid water. It was broad daylight but no one noticed; the crew was either busy preparing for the cable of a tugboat or viewing the coastline off the starboard side of the boat. She mounted the raft as it inflated and paddled south toward the city as fast as she could to generate body heat. The tide was pushing her out toward the ocean, and she paddled harder to make shore. No boats nearby. No help available. She was out of breath and her muscles ached as she fought the sea.

Cassie landed just west of Seacliff onto China Beach, at a row of exclusive mansions rimming the ocean cliffs above.

Emerging from the water, soaking wet and freezing in her ill-fitting tiny black bikini, she shook her arms and then huddled to warm herself. After deflating the raft, she dropped it into the plastic waterproof bag containing her attaché case. Now Cassie needed to find somewhere to change into street clothes.

People strolled close down the path leading to the beach, tourists with cameras admiring the bay. One of them—an older, tall, blond-haired man—noticed her shivering as she walked by them. He yelled at her, “It’s a dumb idea to swim in 55-degree water when the air temperature isn’t any warmer.” The man smiled.

Cassie smiled back. “Yeah. Well I just found that out. Big mistake.” She shivered. “It sure is cold.” Cassie pulled some clothing from the plastic waterproof bag. The restrooms contained showers inside. But she had no soap. She washed and dressed in a blouse and skirt, tossing her still-wet bikini into the trash, along with the raft. She removed her cash from the bag and tossed that, too.

The fog—the “marine layer” as the locals called it—was slowly disappearing, leaving the coast warmer. Wearing clothing, she was happier. Sniffing the air, Cassie noticed a foul stench. She was in serious need of a real cleaning. The shower had done little to wash free the week-old reek of her body odors.

Cassie grabbed her attaché case and walked until she found a bus stop. She boarded a MUNI bus and took it to a BART station in downtown San Francisco. Her next step was to find an abortion clinic. There were many in the city, but she wanted one far away, to avoid being seen by someone at the agency’s San Francisco regional office.

She found a pay phone at the Hyatt on Market Street and the phone book there led her to an obstetrics practice. She spoke with them, begged them, assured them that she wasn’t an anti-abortion group leader, made desperate noises, and they finally offered her the phone number of an abortion clinic in San Mateo. She rented a car at the Hyatt and drove a half-hour south.

By the time she’d arrived in San Mateo, Cassie was exhausted and sleepy. She found the Howard Johnson Express, a cheap hotel on South El Camino Real, a one-mile walk from her intended destination on Ellsworth Street, near the Mills Peninsula Hospital. She showered and slept in the hotel until the middle of the next morning.

Walking north on El Camino Real, Cassie saw San Mateo hadn’t changed since she left graduate school. It was still a museum piece from the 1950s.

She was starved and it was just after 11:30 a.m. Her favorite sushi bar on Third Avenue—Sushi Sam’s Edomata—opened for lunch as she arrived. She said “Hi” to Sam. He looked up, knife in hand, but no longer recognized her. One of the staff walked her to a table and she ordered her favorite, the “Chili Dog,” a tiny slab of *maguro* bordered by seaweed salad and chili bits, coated with a few drops of sesame oil, and wrapped with rice

in crispy seaweed. Sam was a perfectionist, with a perfect life full of routine.

She marveled how he made more inventive and tasty sushi dishes than any sushi bar she'd been in west of the Mississippi and east of Hawaii. The quality remained unchanged from her days at Stanford. Cassie filled her belly. Scallop salad in mayonnaise with *tobiko*, a "California Special," more chili dogs, *amaebi*, and deep-fried shrimp heads. *Delicious!* She was calm. When she left, it was just after 2 p.m.

As she walked toward the clinic, she passed a young woman pushing a baby carriage. The woman appeared to be in a state of bliss cooing to her infant.

Cassie stared at them, triggering a sudden shift in her determination to abort the baby. A wall of guilt built up around her.

But she also felt anger, because there was no way she could ever hope to enjoy bringing up her own child, given her struggle just to stay alive. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. She felt droplets of milk leak from her breasts. Her face scrunched as she cried. She looked for a place to sit. A bench, right by the Post Office. She sat there in the bright sun, wailing uncontrollably. What could she do?

While she wept, her mind spit up a vision of her, older, with a man who looked like a more mature Evan and a teenaged daughter whose face was obscured. The young woman's face in her vision took form. Dirty-blond hair, the girl seemed somehow very familiar to her.

As the vision ended, she rose and walked up Third Avenue toward the corner of San Mateo Drive. She stopped, feeling revulsion at herself, impregnated by a man assigned to kill her, a man she'd murdered.

She steeled herself, making the final decision to murder her unborn child. It was the only choice if she wanted to survive. *What have I become?*

She continued walking, dragging herself toward the place where she could kill her baby.

As she approached the door she found an angry pair of pro-life demonstrators directly in front of her on the walkway into the abortion clinic. She pushed past them, noting their surprise she could force them off the path where they stood. One of them, female, called her a whore, and Cassie flipped her middle finger back at the woman.

Inside it was quiet, as if no one knew what was happening outside.

Cassie waited. She mused that it was illegal to demonstrate at an abortion clinic but that wasn't stopping those people.

When her turn came, she ignored her feelings and fell into role.

"How are you paying?" the receptionist asked through a wad of chewing gum.

She pulled a stack of counterfeit bills from her purse. "My boyfriend doesn't want to let there be a record it might have been his, but at least he gave me the cash."

The clerk looked a bit incredulous, and Cassie smiled. "He thinks it was his cousin Wally did this, and I really don't care which one of them it was. I just want it gone." She pointed to her belly with a throwing-away gesture.

The clerk bore an expression of embarrassment and looked away from her, processing the paperwork without another word.

The office smelled of antiseptic. Once reseated in the waiting area outside a string of examining rooms, a tall, thin, butt-ugly doctor who looked to be younger than she was walked toward her. He smiled through crooked teeth. "Emily Fishcallow?" Cassie nodded and followed him and a nurse into an examining room. As he closed the door, she said, "Yup, I am. And I can't wait for this to end." She pointed again to her belly. "Can we do this today, I mean, right now?"

The doctor stopped smiling. "First things first. I'll need to examine you. How long since you were impregnated?"

"About three weeks," Cassie lied, clicking her chewing gum. He told her to strip and mount the examining table.

After a painful exam, where the stream of embarrassing questions seemed endless, the doctor said, "Well, Ms. Fishcallow, it looks more like nine or ten weeks to me, but you're still okay for us to proceed." He stared straight through her. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Cassie nodded. "Absolutely." But hiding her feelings couldn't keep her from knowing she had other desires.

"Wouldn't a clinic closer to where you live be better?"

Cassie had chosen the Fishcallow identity from the several northern California identities she'd crafted. Her driver's license for the visit showed her as a working class woman from Morgan Hill, sixty miles south of San Mateo. Cassie's guilt forced her to explain herself, in role. "It's a small



town, and I'm a waitress. Letting everyone there know wouldn't be good for me. You know, gossip."

But her feelings had her reeling.

The doctor nodded and looked at his watch. "I can do it today, and I'll have time just before the clinic closes."

She returned to the waiting room, guilt stalking her. At around 4 p.m., she found herself climbing back onto another examining table. This time she faced a different nurse whose face was stern and foreboding. The nurse said nothing while she prepped Cassie. When the doctor arrived, he smiled at her and said, "Relax. This won't take long and you won't feel much of anything until long after you leave." She watched him pick up a hypodermic syringe. He began sounding the crook of her elbow, searching for a vein. "We use a very strong local, but you won't be unconscious. Okay?" She nodded. He continued to speak to her as the room swirled, but she didn't remember anything he said.

Cassie became alert, but remained dazed. The doctor told her, "You might bleed just a little. Don't worry unless it's more than a few drops." Then his voice took on a more personal tone. He said, "I noticed your breasts are producing milk. It's a rare but normal event, and it'll probably stop within a few days."

He said, "Ah, and, as I told you when we were prepping you for the procedure, there was some scarring. So there's a chance you might not be able to bear children as a result of this abortion."

Cassie thought two things rapidly in succession. *Like I'll live long enough for this to be an issue. But if I can manage to survive long enough for it to become one, and I can't get pregnant, I might someday be able to adopt.*

"As for your health right now, limit your movement for the next twenty-four hours, to reduce the likelihood you'll bleed. Take it easy for a few days."

She assured the doctor. "I'll remain in bed as much as possible for a day or two." When she tried to get off the examining table, Cassie staggered, her movements stiff. She dressed, noting pain in her belly and crotch, and fierce throbbing as she walked toward the clinic's exit. But what was more alarming was the feeling she had done something wrong, something evil. *I'm no better than those hunting me.*

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## CHAPTER 10

*July 27, 8:11 p.m.  
Women's Gynecological Service,  
San Mateo Drive,  
San Mateo, California*

It was the end of the day and the lights were being turned off in the outer office. A night watchman opened the door to the outside. She blinked at the dimming dusk streaming toward her as she staggered out. Cassie trailed behind all but the clinic's last staff member.

They all emerged into a nightmare of demonstrators and television cameras. Mistaken for a clinic staff member, demonstrators called her names and threatened her life. She knew that these demonstrations were illegal, but there they were.

Shocked by her unintended visibility, Cassie looked around, found herself staring right into the lens of a television camera.

To her utter surprise and dismay, she saw herself recorded by a national network, their labeled van visible just fifty feet away.

Her safety in San Mateo had vanished in a flash of camera light bulbs. *Time to run!* She didn't bother checking out of the hotel in San Mateo.

Cassie walked slowly, painfully to her rental car. She sat there until the pain subsided. The view out the windshield seemed to spin. Driving would be dangerous, but sitting here wasn't an option.

She pulled out from the parking space and drove down Highway 101 toward San Jose, where she'd be closer to her client's headquarters and closer still to their competitor's regional office. Rush-hour traffic was heavy. She rolled along bumper-to-bumper for well over an hour before she found a cheap hotel in San Jose off Brokaw Road very near the San Jose International Airport. She used the name "Elaine Teman," one of her other

backup identities.

Once in the room Cassie destroyed her “Emily Fishcallow” documents. She tried to rest, but her stomach growled. The pain in her belly wasn’t all from the procedure. *Ravenous*.

Cassie used the free wireless connection provided by the hotel, deciding to go out for her dinner to a familiar microbrewery. Grimacing in pain, she drove to the Gordon Biersch pub. She’d eaten the food there when it was one of her hangouts in graduate school at Stanford. It was still satisfying. The doctor hadn’t mentioned avoiding alcohol, so Cassie relaxed over a glass of ale. The dish she chose, a roast loin of pork in ancho chili cherry sauce, would complement the beer. She savored the flavors.

Her imagination drifted as she watched a succession of men pick up women at the bar. She fantasized for a moment about leading a normal life, looking forward to a husband, children, a house, and maybe even a pet. It depressed her, watching normal people do normal things. She was sure she’d never again sit at a bar and get picked up by a man. She frowned, seeing her plain face and her small bust line reflected in one of the restaurant’s windows. Then she remembered, and plucked the photo of Ann from her pocket. She wondered how the teen was faring.

Cassie drove back to the hotel and turned on the news just in time to see the report on the pro-life demonstration in San Mateo, and to her horror, glimpsed a full five seconds of her face, both far away and then close-up.

A talking head on the television said, “Here you see one of the clinic’s staff marching off into the parking lot. She seems quite angry.” It was lucky, she thought, they identified her as one of the clinic’s staff. However, the news broadcast immediately turned dangerous for her. “And here,” said the TV commentator, “just a few hours later, you see the clinic building set on fire by the protestors. The night watchman and one fireman died in the blaze.”

It was worse than she could have imagined. People died, left their families without fathers and mothers. Definitely national news.

Someone at the agency would see the news report, and might recognize her despite the plastic surgery. They had software to match facial characteristics and account for plastic surgery. Would they care? Could the assassins figure out this was her? Would the person who blew her cover find out and tell them?

She imagined the faces of almost a dozen agency staff and managers who might have sold her cover identity, and then several client governments who could have bought it. She had no idea who had given her up. Northern California wasn't safe anymore. Best to prepare for the worst.

Cassie thought of a line from an old B. B. King blues song she'd played on guitar when she was in college, 'If it wasn't for bad luck, real bad luck, I'd have no luck at all.' Now she'd have to finish up here fast and get out of town in a hurry. She took a painkiller and tried to sleep, without success. She gulped down a sedative, but despite the mix of alcohol and drugs, many hours passed before she drifted off.

Cassie woke the next morning to a hangover in a perfect California day, blue sky, warm, and almost no humidity. She took several aspirin and did her best to put the events from yesterday from her mind. She sat in a meditation pose on the bed, attempting to regain focus. It didn't work. And the aspirin caused some bleeding.

She dressed in a gray blouse and black slacks. Clothes common enough not to draw attention. She packed what she needed in the attaché case and placed everything else into a dry-cleaning bag. She planned to toss the bag into the trash container in the parking lot. She was now prepared to flee the hotel. But first, she needed to conclude her business. Cassie sent an email to Katherine McCandless at Stillwater Technology:

I have completed your assignment, locating and destroying all paper and electronic copies of the material stolen from the company. I request you wire the remaining payment due from one of your offshore banks to the numbered bank account where you deposited my retainer, by end of today. Send me an electronic copy of the sending bank's advice for the wire, at which point I'll send the final remaining electronic copies of all documents to you by certified mail.

Until then, I hold these copies.

To enable you to see my work is now done, here is a key paragraph of one of your documents, translated back into English.

The email continued with part of the “General Description” paragraph she’d found in Hong Kong on the front page of one of the more important documents. She implied the threat that if McCandless failed to pay her, the “final copies” might end up somewhere very public. In minutes she could post all of the documents on the Internet. If McCandless paid her and then tried to locate her, the trail would end with the San Jose postmark, 3,000 miles from where she was going next.

She checked her website every few minutes for incoming email. There was one already waiting for her, from the same company she’d just hacked in Hong Kong.

Your company comes to us highly recommended. We want your company to complete an assignment. Documents were stolen from us, and we want your company to find and return them. Please also provide the identity of the hacker or hackers and thieves who broke into our offices and their network, so we can appropriately deal with them.

A most interesting thought occurred to her, and she smiled. While she might never enjoy her life as a hacker in the world of corporate finance, it would always be more entertaining than a “normal” life.

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## CHAPTER 11

*July 30, 11:09 p.m.  
11 West Kirke Street,  
Chevy Chase Village, Maryland*

Mark McDougal brushed his teeth. He heard the start of the late night news show from the television in the bedroom of their house on West Kirke Street in Chevy Chase Village. He could see his wife's image in the mirror as she rested against a pillow in bed, watching the news.

Curious about the day's events, he emerged from the bathroom. On the wide screen he saw a woman's image glaring at him through the cameras. The toothbrush dropped from his mouth. "Holy shit," he said, spraying toothpaste over the rug as he recognized Sashakovich emerging from the abortion clinic. He was absolutely sure it was her. He thought the shape of her face was different, but the angry glare and the way her hips moved as she walked by the cameras were a dead giveaway. *Nobody else saunters like that. Nobody else wears their emotions that way. It's Sashakovich.*

His wife, her head rising off the pillow, looked daggers at him and pointed to the small pool of toothpaste and saliva on the carpet. "Mark. Don't be a slob. Clean that up. I'm not your maid."

McDougal bent to wipe it, thinking, *that could be her. Maybe she's alive. I'll need to get electronic copy of that news footage early tomorrow and run it against facial recog software.*

\* \* \*

Leland Ainsley, Director of Information Network Security for the agency, almost never arrived home in time to see the late news on television. Tonight was a rare exception. He unlocked the front door of his tiny studio apartment in Georgetown, carrying an expensive leather attaché case filled

with work reading.

Dropping a tech journal article on the sofa, he loosened the yellow and red rep tie from the collar of his starched white shirt. The article, “Trends in MVS Security: What They Mean to Auditors and Data Security Officers,” sponsored by the Henderson Group, fell off the couch onto the floor. He glanced at its new resting place, on top of a piece of toast crust he’d failed to pick up over a week ago. “Sheesh.” Longish blond hair fell into his eyes, and he swept it back from his forehead as he opened the fridge to rummage through the science projects brewing within. He smiled, selecting one not toxic enough to kill him.

Ainsley stood in front of the open microwave door, eating reheated leftover moo shu pork from dinner takeout four nights ago. He stared longingly at a journal article on computer fraud and countermeasures lying on the countertop and then decided he didn’t have the energy. Boob tube tonight.

A tall, slender man thirty years of age, Ainsley was responsible for maintaining security of all the secrets found on the agency’s mainframe servers and internal networks. The wall of his studio displayed his diploma from West Point, but it had been years since he thought about military tactics or even fired a gun. As his eyes passed the diploma, the name his coworkers had secretly given him blurted into his mind: “the Technoweenie Prince.” He hated that. But, that’s exactly what he was. An absolute genius with computer technology. It bothered him to be thought of as unessential by the analysts and operatives he guarded.

As usual, he’d exercised on his way home at a nearby gym, but while he used their torture machines, all he thought about was the state of the art in computer security and countermeasures. He had no social life.

Ainsley hung the suit jacket and pants he’d worn in his closet. He took off his tie and shirt. In his underwear, he sat on his couch, not appearing to notice the trash scattered around the room—trash he’d never have time to throw out.

Wolfing the remaining bits of food into his mouth with chopsticks, he stared at the screen. The national news filled his TV screen. He wiped his mouth with a well-used paper napkin.

He watched a report about a riot outside a San Mateo abortion clinic, sponsored by a group whose leaders were now in jail for burning down the



clinic and killing a staff member and a fireman still inside.

The story bored him. He was about to change the channel when he was startled by the vision of a woman with snarling lips staring at the camera. His jaw dropped. A bamboo shoot fell from his lips. The woman on the screen in front of him, her face filled with rage, was almost familiar but not quite the person he remembered. His eyes followed her, scanning for details. He nodded, recognizing her walk, broad shoulders, and swinging hips—her characteristic movements—and the defiance on her face. Yes, despite the changes to her face, this was someone he knew, and knew well. He whispered, “Cassandra.”

Moments later he smiled. She might be the easiest answer to his most dangerous problem. But first he had to figure out how to handle those he thought wanted him dead. He examined the probabilities of all the outcomes he could think of. Now, which outcome worked best for him? At least he wouldn’t just wait to be picked off. Yes, this was so very good.

He celebrated the moment by filling a shot glass with expensive Lagavulin sixteen-year-old single malt Scotch and savoring its taste. Then he smiled. Re-dressed into his business suit, he returned to his office at the agency.

\* \* \*

Robert Gault also lived in a studio apartment, less than a mile from Ainsley’s. His differed in several ways, but the biggest and most important differences were a larger pantry filled with junk food and health food, and a larger deluxe refrigerator. Gault walked through the door just as the news came on. He walked past the hanging photograph of the woman he’d once been married to and headed directly to the fridge. He never missed the news. He sat and watched, eating a jelly doughnut as Cassandra Sashakovich glared at the camera. *Wow! Looks like Sashakovich. I wonder if she’s still alive? Son of a bitch! How’d she do it?* As a senior operative with the agency, he was overdue for promotion. And maybe her improbable survival was something he could leverage.

Gault scratched the bald spot at the crown of his head. He’d been with the agency for just under twenty years. Competent and patient were terms he thought of to describe himself. But not inspired. Well, maybe knowledge

of the former NOC's location in Northern California was worth something.

\* \* \*

Greenfield looked up from the stack of reports and noted that he was approaching his house. The chauffeur pulled to a stop in his driveway and waited for the director to leave. "Pick me up at 6:45 tomorrow. We'll be going to the Hill." Greenfield exited the limo, walked to the door, and let himself in. *Almost 11 p.m.* He hiked the stairs to the bedroom and kissed Debra, his wife, on the cheek. As he removed his suit, he saw the report she watched on television. She picked up the remote. "Wait, honey. I want to see this." And he also recognized the angry face of Sashakovich as she faced the camera.

He thought for a second. The face was different, but not remarkably so. But the way she walked—it had to be her.

The Saudis hadn't yet figured out what she'd done. But if she was still alive and they did, well, he couldn't let that happen.

He made a mental note to think about how best to handle the problem. Before it became a crisis.

\* \* \*

As the morning ended, the mole sat alone at the basement terminal at agency headquarters. No one knew the mole was there. The hum of air circulating through the forced air system was all the mole could hear.

These terminals were special. They couldn't carry attachments, but they were screened for Internet address links, and certain terms and words triggered alarms. The mole's fingers carefully pecked at the keyboard, tiny clicks echoing off the walls. Long fingers crafted an innocuous message, but its recipient 10,000 miles away wouldn't fail to understand its meaning. The mole entered the Internet address of a video file placed on YouTube in the early morning hours from home, with a label that wouldn't attract anyone's attention unless they'd been told to look for it.

Would it be enough to satisfy those who'd threatened the mole's family? Would they want more?

They always did.

\* \* \*

Before leaving the hotel, Cassie logged into her numbered bank account. She found the payment had arrived in her offshore numbered bank account after pushing through the five financial blinds. The cash was marked as good funds, “available cash.” With the payment confirmation on her screen, Cassie sent an email message to McCandless, thanking her and stating she would mail the documents to her within the hour. She replied to the offer of work from their competitor—the company she’d just hacked—with a brief email:

Thanks very much for your kind consideration, as this assignment would provide us with the opportunity to demonstrate a set of skills of which we take great pride. Regretfully, however, we must decline as the work backlog of assignments to which we’re committed exceeds one year.

The money she’d just earned would last over a year, even if she spent it unwisely. But, if she was prudent, this cash could easily last well beyond five years. She needed to save most of the money she’d earned, to use it to solve her ultimate “problem” with the Islamic extremists. And she’d need much more cash than the half-million dollars she’d just earned to have a prayer of being successful.

Cassie returned the car to the rental agency. She took a taxi to the Amtrak Train Station in a rundown section of San Jose.

\* \* \*

At the moment when Cassie received confirmation she’d been paid, in the small mountain village of Upper Pachir, in Nangarhar Province, thirty miles southeast of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, a fifty-two-year-old man wearing traditional Saudi garb received an untraceable email pointing him to a website that displayed an MPEG-4 video file. Although he knew he couldn’t trace the email back to its source, he knew who’d sent it.

He sat on a small canvas chair, with his netbook on his lap. He scratched his beard as he viewed the attached video. *Shit, the bitch is still alive.* He’d thought as much, but here was the proof he wasn’t finished with

her. *How much does she know?* He had to find out. *The idiot at Greenfield's agency who sent me the email gets to live a little longer.*

He rose from his seat and yelled over his shoulder, "Kassim, get my brother on satellite phone." He scratched the scar on his left cheek, a souvenir of the Soviet Union's adventure in Afghanistan so many years ago. He decided to order the mole to scan cell phone traffic and trace her location

Tariq Houmaz had a momentary flash to the time long ago when he'd studied to become a petrochemical engineer. All he'd wanted then was to work for his father at ArabOil Corporation. But the accident at the refinery where he'd apprenticed had left him disowned. He was sure it had been no accident. Navy SEALs had destroyed the refinery, trying to eliminate someone the United States thought might be a conduit to a Muslim terrorist group. "Collateral damage," the American diplomats claimed. Thirty-seven innocent men and women had died. He was never told if the suspect had been apprehended and executed, or had escaped. Or even if there really was any terrorist.

But his father had blamed him. Pushed him from the family. Soon he'd pay them back. An eye for an eye.

Before he did, he had to know what that bitch knew. Had she stolen just their money, or did she also take their secrets?

\* \* \*

Hamid, Sayed, and their two companions sat in first class on the Singapore Airlines flight to San Francisco. Sayed hummed something while Hamid slept. It would be ten more hours before the plane landed. Sayed thought about how best to get the intel from the young woman. Would he use a knife to remove pieces of her body? They'd been told to collect a few as proof she'd been executed. Which parts would he choose to slice first? He already knew the method of execution: an ancient sharia punishment using a spear or some other sharp object, like a sharpened broom handle.

\* \* \*

Since the newscast featuring her face had aired on television, Cassie knew to remain cautious as she traveled. After seeing herself on television, she

knew the facial surgery she'd had was now worthless. The surgery would have made her more difficult to find, but that was before the scene at the abortion clinic. Her agency now had cam footage of her in action. She'd need to disguise herself for the trip back to Manhattan.

She bought makeup and disguised herself as an ancient hooker one day, as a gentle grandmother the next, then as a business executive. She crisscrossed north and south as she headed east, took her time traveling, rotating her identities with her disguises.

She ignored the screech of the voice in her head. She'd grown used to it. Did all covert operatives come with the voice already assembled inside them? And, what would happen if she stopped hearing it. Would that be good or bad?

It took two weeks to arrive back in Manhattan. The voice in her head remained sullenly silent for the final day of the trip. She checked into the Ramada Plaza New Yorker near the Javits Center, on Eighth Avenue at 34th Street. Sitting in her hotel room, she was happy to be in Manhattan, a place she now called home.

Cassie left the hotel for dinner at Centro Vasco on 23rd Street near Eighth Avenue. A lightly steamed three-pound lobster tasted delicious in celebration of her successful completion of Swiftshadow Consulting's first assignment.

Then she headed to Starbucks where she used her cell's wireless function to download her email. There were no email messages. *How disappointing.*

The next day she retrieved her workstation from the locker at the YMCA, and reclaimed documents and supplies from a locker at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. It took hours, but she was now back in operation.

Late that afternoon she used her cell to check her email and found a message from a contact she didn't know. From small cues – language phrasing, specific terminology, and the nature of the assignment described in the vaguest of terms—it seemed to be either a federal agency or a contractor to a federal agency. She replied,

Interested, but unable to commit without more specific details and a broadly-worded mission statement.

They were unwilling to divulge enough, and she balked at accepting an assignment for something so vaguely defined. However, two email messages each way the next day began with a brief description of the assignment:

We require creation of a semi-repetitive bank-to-bank Electronic Funds Transfer network called Project SafePay, with de novo current accounts set up through screens of multiple financial blinds. SafePay will be used for military payrolls. We need end-points in Middle East, South America, and North America. Work may require in-country presence for very brief visits.

Cassie whispered aloud, “Oh, yes, this is so *me!*” Her whole body shivered in anticipation. It’s just what she’d done for the agency. It’s what she did best. Her smug, arrogant grin felt good.

But seconds later, the tiny voice in her head registered a warning. *Why are you suddenly gifted with something so tailored to you as the mission where they sent a hit man to you? Could this assignment have come courtesy of the special someone from the agency who’d blown your cover? And if not, this could still be the Islamic extremists, trying to backtrace you through your email.*

She sat stock-still, considering her options. Then she shook her head, her face a solemn sadness. She should simply decline politely. Tell them this is something she didn’t possess the skills they required. Maybe she’d get lucky. Might even make them think they hadn’t found her, that she was someone else.

But as she continued her analysis, she realized it wouldn’t work.

*Someone probably has found me. Given that, my best move would be to find out as much as possible about the party on the other side of the email. What to do if they’re hostile? Don’t have the resources or skill to take them out. Could this be an innocent coincidence? Not bloody likely. Might they know who I am and not have hostile intentions? Unlikely. But if they aren’t hostile it could be a bonanza. And a great deal of fun.*

These thoughts keep cycling through her mind like iterations of a broken computer program stuck forever in a looping logic routine. She tried qualifying the puzzle’s parameters and refining the probabilities of each

possible outcome. An hour later, she reread the assignment description. Cassie stretched her fingers and typed her reply:

We need more info to determine fit of assignment to available skill set of our staff. Specifically,

- Who are you (name, title, employer, your superior)?
- Who authorized this operation?
- In which cities in South America, North America, and the Middle East are the current accounts domiciled?
- What languages will be required for communicating with locals?
- What is your budget for our services?
- What is the project plan (by phase name and description)?  
and
- What are the dates by which each phase must be completed?

Please reply for our consideration and acceptance.

She was jumpy for the next four days. Always packed and ready to bolt from the hotel, she looked to her flanks and in store reflections when she left her room to visit restaurants for meals. And she always sat with her back to the wall, close to the exit into the kitchen. She ate sushi at Nobu, and while she was chewing a piece of deep-fried shrimp head—*amaebi*—she heard her cell phone beep with an incoming email. Her head jerked and she almost choked. Coughing, she reached into the patch pocket of her kangaroo pants and removed her cell phone. Cassie read the screen:

We cannot tell you much of what you wish to know. But our budget for you is \$500,000 and we require your assistance as soon as possible.

It was a lot of money for a banking project within a programming contract.

The pace of email was slow torture. Cassie thought in frustration about simply not replying. By now she was sure it was the feds, not Muslim

extremists. Only they could be so arrogant or so stupid as to believe she'd reply. So, she simply didn't.

Instead, she waited to see what would happen. But she kept her attaché case full of clothing, electronics, and additional ammunition for the Beretta she carried. She placed the packed case in a locker at Times Square in the bus terminal. And she remained more cautious at all times. Fear combined with frustration inside her, a recipe for mistakes.

In defense, Cassie researched the actual assignment offer. It took three days, ten to twelve hours each day. She knew it would be dangerous for her to use her own hardware to try to obtain information about this assignment. Instead, she began using computers at the 38th Street branch of the New York Public Library. She also used the rent-a-computer facility at a Manhattan FedEx Office. Places far distant from where she kept her nest.

Cassie was able to hack partway into a network that used the same server as the sender's email. But her capabilities weren't up to completing the task. She searched the alt.binaries newsgroups and blogs where hackers had their crypto communities, picking up new skills at a rapid pace. Learning new techniques was tedious but she suffered it grudgingly, anticipating the results.

It became easier once she broke through the firewall security, which functioned like a front door with multiple locks on a city apartment.

When Cassie successfully hacked the assignment, she found it indeed originated with the feds and guessed they'd selected her by chance. She breathed a sigh of relief.

The assignment was offered through West Wing senior staff, sanctioned by the White House and the highest powers in the Pentagon. This alone made her decision. No way could she ever consider this. But something told her she needed to know everything she could find out about this.

Everyone knew the West Wing ate its young.

She thought about who had sent her the emails. Who knew her reputation? And how? Was it from her Hong Kong operation? Or had someone hacked her website and backtraced her? She decided to research the email's actual sender. *Do unto others before they do unto you.*

She received another email while she was hacking into West Wing's ".gov" website server:



Please reply to me, as the direct authorizer of the assignment we offered you. Will you work with us? Time is of the essence.

Traces carried by this email led her to a deputy chief of staff for the White House, a man known all through Washington DC as having little patience.

Cassie replied:

Dear sir,

We have thought long and hard about this project and believe there are other firms better qualified for completing it, given the one-line description you have offered us. It is in your best interests to find another consulting company.

She kept researching the declined assignment anyway, telling herself it was because she didn't have any pending work. Her skills improved while she completed hacking her way through Washington. Some of the servers were almost impossible to enter, but many were absurdly simple to penetrate.

It took her a week of trial and error until she found the names of most of the parties involved.

Now, Cassie wondered if the Vice President or the President had any knowledge of this project, or if their deniability had been preserved.

Security guarding the President and Vice President's email—due to federal law—was denser and more difficult. It took over a week but she cracked into the back-bearings of "whitehouse.gov." After that, everything became much easier.

Cassie found interoffice emails between almost every member of the West Wing about this specific project. Most of the staff thought it was for payments of US Armed Services payroll. Just as she had been told. She lost interest.

But there was one alarming email that was out of place. It claimed the procedures the White House used to keep itself secure were also keeping Project SafePay's new systems from working. She was startled, given her extensive knowledge of banking. It just didn't make sense.

All domestic payroll systems used semi-repetitive transfers through

ACH, the Automated Clearing House, and they had their own impenetrable internal security. So why would Project SafePay require security beyond what had always been in place? If it was for a payroll in the Middle East or Latin America as well as the United States, the foreign locations would require semi-repetitive SWIFT transactions—not ACH—to make the payrolls secure. She recalled how the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Transactions governed the rules for international funds transfers, and knew that semi-reps were the safest and most economical way to move cash globally.

This disconnect renewed her interest. Why did the feds find security an issue for a payroll-funds transfer system?

She pushed the hair away from her face, staring at the screen. Looking into her notebook's screen, she noticed her eyes lit bright with curiosity. She'd never seen anything like this before.

She dug deep, even using hacking tools she hadn't tried before. Her research found an email sent by the Information Systems Director of the White House to the Project Leader at the US Treasury. He claimed the specifications called for the ability of this new system to handle "one-offs," non-repetitive transfers. These were *never* used for payroll transactions, since non-reps frequently needed to be "repaired" by either the sending or receiving bank, due to errors from re-keying. ACH and SWIFT semi-reps avoided errors. Payroll transactions never needed re-keying. After all, employees always got a payroll transaction for the same amount every pay period.

*Something very wrong here.* Cassie studied the emails between these two people and her jaw dropped.

The funds transferred through this new network with its almost untraceable structure would be used to pay parties in the Middle East. One of the emails came from Mark McDougal's office. *No way!*

## CHAPTER 12

*August 1, 10:23 a.m.  
New York Public Library,  
500 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan*

Cassie sat keying at the public computer she used in a cubicle of the New York Public Library main branch at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. It took only an hour.

The emails she read showed the transfers were paid to Muslim terrorists to keep hurting the United States, with the intention of maintaining the country in a state of alert in the ongoing “war on terror.” Her stomach lurched and she fought to keep from hurling her lunch. *So that’s what I was doing. I’ve helped the government do its dirty deeds. Reclaiming the funds so they could be reused!*

She whispered aloud, “Holy shit on a marshmallow stick! This is the mother of all wrong things. The people running our government are psychopaths!”

In the cubicle next to hers, someone whispered back, “No shit, lady.”

Visions of her visits to the Middle East appeared unbidden in her head. All the times she stole for her government. *Oh no!* She knew beyond doubt the psychopaths in Washington would kill her and everybody she cared about if they found out she knew half as much as she did. And yet, to evade them, she needed to know more. Her heart clenched. She was beyond panic now, and she knew it would take days before she calmed. *How could they do this? It’s evil beyond anything I’ve ever imagined.*

She took a fresh thumb-drive from her stash and shook her head. *Gotta make copies of all this.*

Cassie placed electronic copies of the evidence onto a thumb-drive and put it in a Post Office box at the Eighth Avenue at 34th Street Post Office.

Cassie also placed copies of the thumb-drive in lockers at the YMCA and the Port Authority Bus Terminal. She wondered what would happen if this info was posted on the Internet—maybe on YouTube. Then she remembered wikileaks.com and its publication kit for classified, censored, or otherwise restricted material of political, diplomatic, or ethical significance. And of course it could always be sent to Al Jazeera.

But what she needed was some kind of time bomb that would automatically update her website if she didn't actively stop it from doing so. She'd have to craft a computer program to unleash the info if she failed to check in, as a "life insurance policy."

But she wasn't a programmer and hadn't learned how to create and test such a program.

\* \* \*

Cassie spent her days at the YMCA and worked on her self-defense skills. Four times a week she rode a stationary bike twenty miles, did fifty pushups and seventy sit-ups, and drank two quarts of water to replace the perspiration that dripped from her. She left when her arms, back, and legs were a wall of burn. Her waist slimmed as she worked, and one whole size dropped off her. Her biceps bulged as she lifted one hundred pounds in free-weights.

Every day she looked more like her Uncle Misha.

\* \* \*

"We've been sitting in hotel rooms for almost two weeks." Sayed shook his head. "I hate San Francisco. We've been everywhere and there's no trace of her."

Hamid wanted to hit his coworker. "Silence! I will call Tariq and ask him what he wants." He picked up the satellite phone and punched in a number. Walking to a corner of the room, he summarized their situation and asked his client, "And what now?" He listened for a few seconds, then terminated the conversation and faced the three others. "We're to go to New York City. Tariq believes that's where she'll settle. She used it as her base before. Perhaps she'll do something foolish and at last we'll find her."

\* \* \*

On Saturday, Cassie decided to pretend her life was normal. She vowed that today she'd forget who she was, what she'd become. She dressed in a low-cut red tank top and black kangaroo pocket shorts. She took a bus to nearby Red Bank, and attended the Red Bank Jazz & Blues Festival. It was her first blues festival in almost a year. On a beach chair at the Harbor Stage she listened to an entire day of guitar, harmonica, and vocals by local and nationally known artists.

Between acts in the afternoon, she sat on a bench eating a barbecued tri-tip sandwich. A man about her age approached her. She noticed his guitar strapped against his back. She thought, *oh my, a Galveston chrome-plated brass bell dobro-resonator 6-string*. Its surface shone in the sun like a mirror.

She stared at it with envy. It was a professional musician's instrument, nicely crafted but not expensive. She admired the guitar's biscuit bridge, imagining the rich tones its strings would make when he plucked them.

"Havin' fun?" the musician asked.

"Yeah." Cassie volunteered nothing more, but he sat on the ground at her feet. He stayed there for a while, while Cassie's mind feverishly calculated whether he could be a threat. "Are you one of the performers?"

He smiled in surprise, looking like he'd found a twenty-dollar bill. "Yeah, actually. I'm Michael Bigalow. I play Piedmont-style finger-picking blues. Stuff from the late twenties and thirties. Blind Blake, Lemon Jefferson, Leroy Carr, and Scrapper Blackwell. Familiar with it?"

"Yup." Hearing the names of her blues heroes made her smile. "Nice guitar." She reached over his shoulder and touched its cool body. Her breast touched his neck for just a moment. She gulped.

He smiled back. "You play?"

"Yeah. Played in college. Until recently I had a Martin D-18."

He examined her more carefully. "Nice axe. Wanna try this one?"

She suspected he'd tempt her into sampling the guitar, hoping it might lead him to sampling her in return. Cassie's eyes scoured him as if seeing him for the first time. He had a rugged look to him, sort of scruffy. Thin, but the music business didn't offer enough money for non-stars ever to fatten. Almost attractive. At best he'd provide her with a work distraction.

She decided to tell him “No,” but found herself licking her lips and one word came from her. “Sure.” She was surprised to find she now held the guitar. He handed her a metal slide but she declined. “Can you loan me a thumb pick?”

She noted his surprised expression. He leaned closer. “You play Piedmont-style blues?” Piedmont-based blues used a thumb pick and those playing that style were a rarity.

Cassie nodded and took the offered thumb pick. She played some lines from the sultry old “Sportin’ Life Blues,” from the mid-1920s by Brownie McGhee.

She handed the guitar back to him. “Very nice. Handles like a sports car.”

Bigalow said, “Your playing’s real sweet. Ever think of doing this professionally?”

“Never. The life expectancy of musicians isn’t good.” She thought neither was hers. She fought the urge to smile at the irony. “When are you playing?”

“In an hour at the Marina Stage. I get fifty minutes. Will I see you there?”

Cassie wondered if her agency file contained anything about her love of blues guitar. *Of course it does.* She wondered, was this safe? She shook her head trying to regain focus. She remembered being raped in Riyadh. It was why she’d had an abortion. Yes, Riyadh had caused all the problems in her life. Even if she wasn’t targeted here, he was still dangerous. No, she could never go to bed with him.

She said, “Maybe. There’s so much here. But even if I do, I’ve got to leave soon. Good luck on your gig.”

Bigalow looked disappointed. As he walked off, her eyes drifted down to her flat chest. He must be hard up if he wanted her. *What a disappointment my life is. Shit.*

But her fingers tingled. She realized him wanting her wasn’t what made her feel frustrated. It was just the touch of his guitar, another thing she sorely missed. She was even more surprised to find a tear from her eye had fallen on her thumb where the pick had nestled only moments before.

\* \* \*

As the train to New York passed the natural gas refinery in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Cassie held her nose and breathed as little as possible. After so long in clean air, the Jersey pollution was offensive. She looked out the train window watching the flaming vent burn waste gas from oil refineries, thinking, Jersey is the only state needing a pilot light.

The next day, she checked into the Hotel Wolcott.

Cassie thought about hacking Project SafePay. *If I can determine which transfer banks are involved, and which government bank accounts are being used, I can just grab the cash, bit by bit, and that might yield the resources I need to take on the Islamic extremists who hunt me.*

How long did she have before the hunters found and terminated her?

Could she even hope to prevail?

What would it take to go on the offensive?

How long would crafting a plan take?

How much would it really cost?

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# PART II

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## CHAPTER 13

*August 4, 11:36 a.m.  
Hotel Wolcott,  
4 West 31st Street,  
Manhattan*

Two days passed, and Cassie hadn't done anything about her situation. No objective for the future. No plan at all. It all seemed hopeless to her.

She wandered the West Side, exploring her new neighborhood, stopping and looking at the reflections from store windows to ensure no one followed her. The area was chock full of wonderful but reasonable restaurants and brewpubs. She ate at a hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant, watching the people outside who walked by. The food was greasy but tasty. When she'd finished her lunch, she left, dragging her empty rolling suitcase behind her.

Off to Penn Station and the lockers where she'd stored additional copies of her identities and her computer equipment for quick getaway in case of emergency. She stopped occasionally to watch traffic flows. No one stopped behind her.

Cassie opened her locker and removed some paper and ink for her printer. Returning to the hotel, she stood in an alleyway across the street for almost a half hour, watching traffic move past the Wolcott's entrance. Simple tradecraft to keep her safe.

The next day she visited the YMCA. She found a bulletin board that featured activities for residents of the community and several martial arts classes. Cassie enrolled in two refresher classes, jujitsu and aikido, signing her name as "Denise Hardcastle," from Woodbine, Iowa. She visited one of the classes, led by a tall, thin man. She needed his knowledge and hoped her decision to attend would yield results. The next day she returned and visited

a class in judo led by Judy Hernandez.

Cassie practiced with each of them twice a week. Over a period of two weeks she came up to speed. Cassie thought of them as friends. With Judy's help, she gained strength, and also lost some more weight. In less than two weeks Cassie could lift her own weight. When Judy asked, Cassie told her she was a struggling fiction writer who occasionally worked as a journalist, but only when desperate for cash.

Judy helped Cassie practice several moves designed for close combat offense and defense. They had been working out for almost two hours, and it was getting late.

Judy moved her arms and hips in tandem, sweeping Cassie off her feet and knocking her breath from her as she landed. Judy spoke with a thick Brooklyn accent. "Living in this city, you really need to know how to defend yourself. Know what I mean?"

Cassie stayed on the mat until she could once again breathe, felt her ass throb in the spot where she landed. She knew she'd be black and blue tomorrow. "Ouch. Well yeah, but some lessons are just painful."

Cassie rolled over and rose up. "Let's break. Enough for today." The wall clock showed it was after 8 p.m. The place was deserted except for them.

Judy and Cassie headed for the lockers on their way to the showers. They stripped off their clothes and Cassie found Judy staring at her. Judy's mouth fell open as Cassie wiped a few drops of creamy liquid seeping from her breasts. "Denise, is that what I think it is?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm afraid so," Cassie replied, uncertain as she watched Judy for signs this might complicate their budding friendship. She found only curiosity in Judy's expression.

"Cheez, how'd that happen?" Judy pointed with a circular gesture at Cassie's tiny swollen breasts.

She took a deep breath as images swirled through her. Composed, finally. "One big accident. And the guy literally died on top of me. You could say the shitbag came and then he went." She tried to keep her voice from cracking as she remembered murdering her baby. "So I had it aborted, but no one told my breasts." She turned her face away for a moment, hoping she wouldn't start crying.

"Have you ever, you know, have you?" Judy pointed at her mouth, and

Cassie feigned shock. Judy winced, wearing a sheepish expression. She might have taken too much for granted in opening this entire discussion topic. “Hey, Denise, I had to ask.”

Cassie shrugged. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Judy sat frozen on the locker room bench, unsure of what to say next. She reached out and touched Cassie’s cheek.

Cassie thought fast. *Is this safe? Should I offer myself?* She felt she could trust a woman not to rape her, and it been so long for her without the comfort of another with loving intentions.

She nodded. “You’ll never be able to reach me from there. Come here.” Judy sat on the bench closer to Cassie, but still too far away. “Closer.”

Judy straddled the bench and reached a hand to touch Cassie’s left nipple. Cassie could smell Judy’s odors. The perspiration of her workout permeated Judy’s body, plus garlic and what seemed like the aroma of hamburger emerged from Judy’s mouth as she smiled at Cassie.

They stared into each other’s eyes, then Judy moved her face toward Cassie’s. Closer. Their lips touched, then separated. Judy moved in again and they kissed. At first Cassie thought it was mere exploration, soft and gentle. But it grew passionate and then they were touching and squeezing each other, fingers thrusting everywhere, each pushing into the other with a hunger—in Cassie’s case—pent up from months of celibacy.

She remembered Riyadh. She should stop now. Without control over her own hand, it moved and touched Judy’s face. *What am I doing?*

But it was happening and now, she was unable to keep herself from wanting it. *Want it bad. Real bad.*

Cassie saw that her towel had dropped on the floor. Judy tried pushing Cassie onto it, but Cassie said, “Me on top.” Judy agreed with reluctance. Then they reversed positions. Each one faced the other’s vee, had their tongue embedded within the other’s genitals, licking, sucking, nibbling, rubbing, and prying with fingertips. Cassie felt Judy’s finger, then most of her hand, part her vaginal lips to enter and reach deep into her. She moaned with arousal and replied in kind with her hand.

Judy was fast and easy but Cassie took forever, time passing as her core slowly heated toward a climax on which she had to focus all her attention, forcibly coaxing it from her body. Her orgasm pulsed stronger,

longer, and felt more satisfying than she'd remembered any before.

Their experience ended in the shower as, after they'd satisfied each other multiple times, they washed each other. *What now?* She'd never had sex with a friend before, and never with a woman. She decided, *damn! I need to exert more control over what I do in my personal life, and what I let others do to me.*

As if feeling Cassie's ambivalence, Judy said, "Don't concern yourself about this, Denise, unless you want more of me. It's not that I didn't enjoy it. You're a handful in the sack. But you're not very submissive, and I hate to fight for control when...well, when, you know."

And Cassie did understand. Her few encounters with men were fights over control, and only Evan could accept her domination. He was the only man who'd ever had the patience to deal with her. Thinking about it now, she realized she always "fucked" men, never let them "make love" to her and absolutely never let them fuck her.

As she understood the logical implications of her actions, Cassie wondered what it would take for her to change her behavior. But wouldn't that leave her more vulnerable?

Cassie's face wrinkled wistfully. "Oh, well, at least we can remain friends, right?" And when Judy smiled and nodded, Cassie said, "Yes. Friends." They both laughed.

\* \* \*

Her hack of the White House server left Cassie concerned about her personal security. She reviewed her knowledge of counter-surveillance tradecraft, hoping to improve her life expectancy. She bought prepaid cell phones with enough time to get her through a week of usage, then discarded them and bought replacements. She only used these for outgoing calls. She gave the first phone's numbers to Judy, but Judy hadn't called and Cassie discarded the cell phone.

Cassie used her cell phone only to connect to her website and retrieve email. She built over a hundred false or stolen identities, then ran out of materials. But she didn't think she'd need more. Cassie continued to rotate through her identities and changed hotels every week.

She had yet to even visit the same restaurant twice. There were so

many great ones she wasn't even tempted. Her large rolling suitcase could accommodate a single burner camping stove and had room enough for cooking supplies. Cassie could rig up a portable kitchen wherever she went, providing the hotel room had electric outlets, a microwave, a coffee maker, and a refrigerator.

Her only location of habit was the Y. *But how safe is it to not alter this habit? Should I go to the other Y branches in Manhattan?*

She felt vulnerable all the time.

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## CHAPTER 14

*August 6, 12:06 p.m.  
Milburn Hotel,  
242 West 76th Street,  
Manhattan*

On a sunny Saturday morning, Cassie found herself humming the words to a blues tune from the early 1930s, “Midnight Hour Blues,” by Leroy Carr. She watched an old PBS Julia Child cooking show she’d never seen, and arranged the ingredients she’d need to make the dish as she sang.

She brushed the dirt off a pound of crimini mushrooms, diced an onion, and opened a small bottle of brandy for the cream of mushroom soup recipe. Her mouth watered in anticipation. She could smell some of the assembled ingredients, the strong pungent aroma of the uncorked brandy, the forest odor of the raw porcini mushrooms, and the sweet smell of crème fraîche she’d bought at Zabar’s gourmet delicatessen.

From the room’s television, the show started, and Julia Child spoke about her guest chef.

Cassie’s cell phone vibrated in her pocket. *No one knows my number!*

The phone’s display listed the caller’s ID as “Private.” Cassie hesitated, someone had found her. *Maybe it’s a wrong number.* She took a breath, then pressed the Answer button and pressed the phone against her ear.

She remained silent, patient until she heard the caller. “This is Leland Ainsley for Swiftshadow.” She said nothing. As the agency’s Director of Information Security, Ainsley wasn’t an operative. He was more like a chained junkyard dog, keeping the back yard clear of trouble.

Cassie had never liked him. He’d always tried to interest her in himself, using pick-up lines she found ludicrous.

Was he the person who'd leaked her cover? Before this call, she'd thought the traitor was Assistant Director McDougal or Director Greenfield. Maybe even Robert Gault, McDougal's favorite operative. Or one of her fellow operatives who knew her from when they'd trained together at The Farm. Ainsley hadn't had that training and therefore hadn't occurred to her as a possible traitor. But now, she admitted, maybe she'd been wrong.

Cassie willed her voice to speak. "Briefly state your business."

"Cassie, we were told you're dead. You can't imagine what I went through, trying to—"

"Your business, Mr. Ainsley." She could feel anger overpower her fear and tried to keep both emotions from her voice.

"Lee. It's Lee. I have some information for you. Or rather, I have information to trade with you."

She felt her face grimace, turning to a sneer. "What kind of information could you have that might interest me? And what do you expect in return?"

"Cassie, where can we meet? You just won't believe what I found."

"First, I never meet with anyone. *Ever!* Second, I can't imagine you know anything of value to me. And third—"

"I know who, how, and why your cover was blown. I'm almost sure of the intel."

Cassie's heart almost stopped. Her jaw fell open. She tried to speak but her mouth didn't work. Misha's voice in her head screamed, *hang up now, you idiot!*

She wasn't aware of how much time passed before she refocused. Her anger melted into fear and indecisiveness. In a near panic, she wondered what she should do?

Gradually, her curiosity won out. But that wasn't good. What if the phone call was a setup? What if he was a threat? And even if he wasn't, others might have the same skills. They could also find her.

Her mouth opened and words came, words she couldn't control, filled with rage at being in danger yet again. "And what do you want in return for this relatively useless and worthless piece of intel?"

She could almost envision his smile, his blond-haired head nodding, as he must now understand she'd agreed she was interested after all. *Fuck!*

"Cassie, I think what happened to you may happen again, maybe to me

this time, unless we stop it. I can't survive alone for long, just like you can't."

She thought about the implications of every possible response she might make to his statement. "Give me a phone number where I can reach you and a non-agency email address. And a list of dates with times when you could disappear for at least three hours without anyone suspecting."

"Look, if I can find you, others can too. Destroy this cell immediately. Call me at 202-463-1294 when you can, and stay on the line for less than ten seconds, giving me the number of the pay phone where you're located. I'll send you a choice of meeting dates in DC." He terminated the call.

Cassie noted the entire conversation had taken almost ninety seconds—way over the magic three-second boundary that made a call almost impossible to trace. "Damn." She dropped the cell phone on the floor and crushed it with her shoe, gathered all the documents identifying her, and bolted from the hotel.

She jogged several blocks to the Javits Center where she found a bank of pay phones on the first floor. It was crowded there and she felt safe. "Ainsley, it's 212-687-1269. Cassie out. When you call, say the words "death letter blues" to identify yourself." She hung up. "Death Letter" was one of the oldest blues, with many versions claimed by various blues legends from the 1920s, starting with Charley Patton and Son House. Something few people would think of.

She waited. Over five minutes passed before he called her back. He gave her an untraceable non-agency email address at hushmail.com, a list of untraceable cell phone numbers for phones given him by the agency, and a list of days and times when he could be missing from work for up to three hours without it being noticed. He finished the call with, "I'll need some help very soon or I might be dead. Not to mention it's likely you'll be dead too." This call took over two minutes, but she figured no one could have traced it.

When the call ended, she walked back to the hotel, wondering if it was still a safe place. She watched its entrance from the front window of a convenience bodega until she was sure there was no one scouting out the entrance. Twenty minutes. Cassie returned to her room.

Cassie was too disturbed to cook. She brewed a cup of coffee, dumped in the brandy, and drank it in three swallows. She thought about all Ainsley



told her.

She came to a quick decision, smashed her remaining cell phones, and packed her attaché case with three complete changes of clothes, five alternate fake identities, \$5,000 in counterfeit \$20 bills, and her toolkit. She dressed in her homeless outfit, stuffed her kitchen equipment into the rolling suitcase, and packed her notebook computer into another case she placed atop her suitcase. She left by the service exit.

From the alleyway, she waited to see if anything had changed at the front of the hotel. No action there. She took a deep breath, relaxing, and walked from the alley onto the street, crossing to the opposite corner just as a van screeched to a halt in front of the hotel. Two men bolted from the van and sped into the lobby. She recognized them as the ones who chased her from her Washington apartment. One carried a sharpened broom handle and all had bulges under their trench coats. Cassie continued on, not looking back. This was getting old.

She walked toward Penn Station. On her way she bought a new burner cell phone. She wondered if Ainsley had set her up. *Did he call the men who are probably searching my hotel room this very second? If I escape, it will qualify his bona fides. If I don't, I'm dead. Whose side is Ainsley on?*

So many unanswered questions. So many threats. She steeled herself to what her life had become.

Cassie was gone from New York State in under an hour.

## CHAPTER 15

*August 8, 1:14 p.m.  
L Street near First Street,  
Washington, DC*

The summer day broiled down, steamy and smoggy, its colors bright, contrasts stark. Cassie waited in a nondescript rental car for the approach of her prey. Parked on L Street near First Street, the car was one block from the DC bus station where she'd arrived.

She examined her surroundings looking for telltale signs of trouble. No one looked interested in her or acted suspiciously. She cracked the window open and turned off the air conditioner to listen to the street noise, the first indicator of danger. There was garbage in the street, and the smell of it flowed freely into the car. The neighborhood buildings seemed old and not well maintained. Some were ruins. Beads of nervous perspiration dotted her forehead.

Her life had changed so much since Riyadh. She'd been cheated out of her future, and it left her in a state of rage. She hated what the terrorists had turned her into. *I feel more and more like a fanatic, acting like I'm turning me into the very hand of evil. Sneaking about, without a home to call my own, no hope of recovering what had once been my life. I can't even enjoy spending the money I've stolen without drawing attention to myself, and attention might mean my death.*

She hoped her meeting with Ainsley would bring her one step closer to claiming it all back.

After she'd left the hotel in Manhattan, she'd bought numerous tiny pieces of technology, a hunting knife, and another change of clothing, all of which barely fit when squeezed tight into her attaché case. Entering the Port Authority bus depot, she'd visited her locker and taken a few of her spare

identities. Just in case. She'd sent Ainsley an email at his hushmail account letting him know when, where, and how she'd make contact.

The agency had taught her at The Farm how to do surveillance, but she'd never run an operation. And the operative she ran today wasn't a real operative, since he'd never worked even one day outside the agency's offices.

To pass the time, she counted the things she feared. There were so many.

She feared traveling. It took forever for her to reach a destination, given the "safe" choices of bus, train, and freighter.

She hated the empty hours when she pretended to be someone else, disguised sometimes as an angry dyke, ancient prostitute, or smiling grandmother.

And she worried because of the additional risks of travel she had to mitigate, such as living in hotels, so close to others she feared. Her ability to work the logistics improved with real-world practice but she found planning a trip pure torture. It had to be perfect every time.

Cassie feared exposure. It was little consolation that every operative feels this dread or that some grow accustomed to it. A rare few even become addicted to their terror. She thought them crazy. She'd already been burned.

She feared Washington, DC. Her escape from this city had left her terrified. But before her odyssey started, there were other reasons for her apprehension. The city itself was an odd mix of tenement slums and bureaucratic buildings, with good hiding places for violent crimes, which occurred with regularity.

More out of loneliness than for any other reason, Cassie hated Washington. Women outnumbered men in this competitive city. She'd been dismissed as a servant, inferior to the men who ran almost everything. She wasn't permitted to compete with males in the agency. Among the females, she'd struggled for scraps left over by those who were more attractive, even if less intelligent. She knew she was brighter than her peers, but men never chose plain-faced, flat-chested women for anything, from choice operative assignments to relationships.

Before Evan had left to fight in Iraq, she'd been lucky. She'd had a relationship and a social life. He was her first, but now he was dead, his

body blown into a smudge by an armor-piercing, focused-blast IED. And since he'd left her to fight in Iraq, her love life had been nothing short of terrible.

She hated having no real identity. She no longer knew who she was. Worst of all, she hated herself for being afraid.

Oblivious to the few people walking the street past her rental car, she changed outfits from simple poverty to simply outrageous. Donning a bright red plastic-leather raincoat and pink spiked shellac wig, she chewed a large wad of chewing gum, put on a gold-beaded emerald green blouse, black leather miniskirt, and black fish-net stockings. She hid the Beretta she'd bought in Spanish Harlem in the back of the green leather belt around her waist. She'd bought the weapon in Harlem after Ainsley's call. Then she applied makeup with a putty knife. Dressed in role, she was perfect for this poverty-stricken neighborhood.

She took one last look in the mirror. The only things she couldn't change were the almond-shaped liquid-brown eyes and her heart-shaped face.

Almost ready for show time. The man she sought now rounded the corner, going away from her location. *Good. Let him sweat a bit more.*

Cassie exited the car, visiting a tavern across the street she thought might serve her purposes. She entered its front door and checked it out. Dark, old and quiet. Besides the faint smells of beer and cigarettes, there were no discernible odors from where she stood. Booths dimly lit near the rear exit.

She found one where the light through the bar's sole window was blinding when she faced the street. It would be perfect. She talked briefly to the balding, fat old bartender, saying, "I'll need privacy in about a half hour." She pointed toward the rear. "A booth in the back." She passed him a twenty-dollar counterfeit bill and smiled.

The old man smiled back, showing yellow teeth. "Sure. No problem. You can hook him, but no sex in here."

She nodded, and returned to the car, where she put finishing touches on her outfit.

Seven minutes later, Cassie held a cell phone in one hand and field glasses in the other, and waited for Ainsley, who must by now be soaked with sweat, to round the corner three hundred feet away. Perspiration

streamed down his face.

Cassie toyed with the thought of having him do a few more short trips around the area. But an hour and three miles of trotting in the hot autumn sun would have left him in no shape to attempt anything physical, if this was his intention. And an hour was long enough for her to know he wasn't being followed.

The disguise gave her a good feeling. She felt like an actress about to go on stage, and the stage fright vanished. Suddenly, she was confident she could do this. And wondered why she didn't feel fear any more. The voice in her head remained silent.

Cassie grinned, seeing his lost, defeated, and exhausted expression. She hit her cell phone's Redial button. "Ainsley, proceed now to the tavern directly across the street from you and sit in the booth closest to the rest rooms, on the side facing the street side window. Take everything in your pockets—*everything*—and place it all on the bench across from you in the booth. I'll be with you directly."

She waited until he entered by the front door, then examined herself in the rear view mirror to ensure she looked within role. Still no noise from the voice in her head, so it must be safe to do this.

Taking a deep breath, she exited the car and walked into the alleyway, entering the bar through its rear exit. Passing the rest room, she noticed odors she'd missed when she entered before. The tavern's rear smelled equal parts of urine and beer, but there were other odors, some more terrible—she could smell fear and blood from a fight—and others, savory, like shepherd's pie.

As she passed the restroom she saw the back of Ainsley's head. He sat facing the light, rubbing his eyes, blinded by the sunshine flowing through the dark bar's only window. She removed the chewing gum and dropped it into a tissue she placed into the pocket of the coat.

Standing right behind him, less than one foot away, she quietly removed her Beretta pistol with its silencer from her belt and unlocked the safety. Pulled to load a shell. Ready to fire. Cassie shoved the pistol into the back of his neck and whispered, "Slowly get up and place both your hands on the table."

He did, saying, "Sheesh, you're very touchy, aren't you, Cassie?"

"I expect you'd be if people were trying to kill you." She patted him

down and found the workout—running all over the city—seemed to have left him with an unexpected erection. She sighed, wondering how he'd managed this. Maybe he found danger arousing?

She found nothing else of consequence and nothing dangerous.

Cassie sniffed the air. His perspiration smelled sweet, with no trace of aftershave or cologne. And no scent of fear on him. She moved to face him and sat. "Wow, Ainsley, I must guess you're really glad to see me." She pointed to the bulge in his pants and although he didn't reply, his face got red.

Cassie examined the contents of his pockets on her bench seat in the tavern stall. Once again, there was nothing dangerous. She handed back his wallet, keys, a scrap of paper with a shopping list from the supermarket, and a black plastic comb. He put everything into his pockets.

He passed her the cell phone she'd left for him in a waste basket outside the agency's office building. She exchanged this for a sealed envelope she'd lifted from the same waste basket, containing his cell phone. She checked the cell phone she'd given him, to ensure he hadn't used it to make any outgoing calls, and then dropped it into her gaudy purse. No outgoing calls meant it might be safe here, for at least a while.

It felt good to finally be in control. She forced her face into a serious expression, wanting to smile so much, her face hurt. "Sit, please, Lee. Can I buy you a drink?"

He nodded. "Lagavulin, straight up."

"Yum. Strong and smoky single malt. If I'd known you were a man of taste when we worked together, maybe I'd have responded differently to your clumsy passes." She pointed to the bartender and held up two fingers. "Lagavulin straight up."

The bartender lifted the bottle from the shelf to show her he had the correct brand. She nodded.

Cassie made an attempt to sound casual, her voice low and even. "Did you know you're the one person I never expected or wanted to hear from?"

The bartender brought their drinks and Cassie handed the old man two counterfeit twenty-dollar bills. She told him to keep the change, and he vanished.

"You've no tradecraft, no experience in operations, no idea what 'covert' even means. Not in the least interesting. So tell me, Lee, why are

we finally in a bar on a date?”

Ainsley took a sip of the single malt. From his expression she could tell he savored it. Then, for the first time, he looked at her. “Cassie, you look great, even in costume.” He must have realized she was about to dismiss him, and held up his hand to stop her. “Well, see, I found traces on our server. Traces of traffic no one was ever supposed to see. Found ’em by accident.”

He drew his hand through his long blond hair. “Someone used one of the secure workstations in the basement to send and receive email, and this wasn’t agency business. I don’t know who it was, but the message scraps I found led me to believe the message sender was being threatened by a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot. The incoming stated they were owed a life and threatened to take out someone’s entire family unless their mole at the agency offered up some substitutes. And the agency mole begged for the lives of his or her family, claimed they’d already offered you up, and said they could deliver one more if you weren’t enough or if you evaded them.”

He flinched, seeming to recall the event. “I can’t tell you much more, except if I’m right, then I’d be the most likely substitute, since I know more about how to track and trace data moving through the agency’s computers than anyone else. I’m therefore a big threat to our mole.”

He looked squarely into her eyes, his grin sheepish. “I guess no one expected you to survive this long.” He wiped sweat from his brow with the napkin from the table setting.

She thought about the facts and opinions he’d had offered up. “And, Lee, how do I know the mole isn’t you?” She purposely showed teeth through her smile, not feeling at all friendly.

He frowned in return, his brow furrowed. “You can’t, and the only reason I’m begging your help is I’m convinced I’m your substitute. My only hope for survival is for you to find this person who has a family he or she loves and fears will be murdered if they can’t kill you, before they offer up me. And know this: I could have given them—whoever they are—your location by backtracing your cell phone, but instead I chose to be here with you. So isn’t that proof I’m not the mole?”

She remembered the men who showed up at her hotel. She wasn’t convinced, and let the silence hang between them like a shroud.

His face showed panic, and even in the air-conditioned bar,

perspiration flowed down his face. Cassie sniffed the air, smelling the close-by, hard odor that was a confession of his terror. She felt an unanticipated sexual thrill run through her all the way to her core. It felt like an electric current turned on inside her.

She ignored the sensation and considered his story with care, looking for logic flaws, and she found none. The big question was, did she believe him. And if she did, what should she do? What could she do?

“Almost everyone working at the agency is married with the exception of us, and most have families. Director Greenfield, Assistant Director McDougal, at least four project managers on the analysis side, over eighty country managers, both contracts administrators, and all six covert operatives who aren’t NOCs. They all have families. It’s a long list of suspects.” She spat the words out.

At this, Lee smiled back. “Not so. I tried to find a way to narrow down the list and changed the security on the basement terminals so only director-level employees can log into them. No one below director level complained and asked to use the terminals. So it’s either Greenfield or McDougal. Both are married and have children.” He hid his nose in the glass, sniffing the smoky Scotch.

Cassie shrugged. “What if someone hacked their way into the secure terminal area? Someone without a family. Bob Gault, for example.”

He shook his head. “I’d have noticed. So the only question left is, do you trust me?”

Cassie stared back. He’d asked the one question at the heart of her dilemma. If she trusted him, she’d conclude he’d delivered valuable information. She decided that for the time being, she’d suspend her suspicions. “Okay. I guess you’ve earned your favor. So what do you want from me?” She sipped her drink and waited.

“I need you to find the mole.” He put his glass down on the table. “If you agree to help me, you’ll need a way to contact me.” He looked ready to offer her a piece of paper he suddenly had in his hand, but she interrupted him, reaching across the table and touching his hand.

“I have a favor to ask first, to prove your value.” Their eyes locked together. She reached into her handbag and handed him the piece of paper containing the printed phone number and initials carried by her intended assassin in Riyadh. She had also printed the license plate number on the



paper. “I need to know whose phone number this is, probably in Saudi Arabia. Whose initials might these be? And who owns the vehicle with this Saudi license plate? And this one in Washington. It was outside my apartment building the day McDougal fired me. Who are they? Where do they live? What do they do? Let me know as soon as you can.”

She reached once more into her handbag. She handed Ainsley the assassin’s cell phone in a plastic dry-cleaning bag labeled “Golden Tulip Hotel, Riyadh.” She said, “Have agency forensics process this. Tell me everything about it, fingerprints, purchase place and date. Everything.” She reached into her bag one final time and removed one of her untraceable cell phones. “This is how we’ll stay in touch. Keep the battery charged. Don’t call me, I’ll call you. And, Lee, *never* use this phone, *ever*, except to keep it on you at all times. Clear? I’ll be in touch soon.”

She saw relief on his face. Ainsley nodded in acceptance. “Sure. And thanks.”

He put the paper he’d held into the table’s ashtray, took a match, and burned the paper. Then he picked up the ashes and rubbed them against his fingers until they were just a smudge on his skin.

The darkened flesh of his fingers morphed into Evan’s ashes and her eyes suddenly blinked with tears. But only for a second.

Cassie rose and slowly backed away from the table until her rear touched the exit door to the alleyway. She pushed it open with her hip, turned, and disappeared as fast as she could.

\* \* \*

On the Greyhound bus back to Manhattan, Cassie thought about whether she was now ready to hunt those who hunted her. But this investigation would reach way beyond her resources. She lacked enough cash and had no plan.

She couldn’t decide whether she trusted Lee. If she didn’t, she should let him twist in the wind. It would be simple for her to let him suffer the fate she had so far avoided. Would his death satisfy the hunters?

If not, she should make every effort to help him now, before they came after him or tried to murder her again. Which they were probably now planning.

Could she hold herself responsible if she did nothing and let Ainsley die? In the end, Cassie didn't know if she could live with the guilt of his death added to the load she carried for murdering her assassin and her unborn child.

She resolved to help him.

\* \* \*

Cassie decided Washington, the home of her former agency, was more dangerous than Manhattan. New York was gargantuan, with more and better places to hide. But when she returned to Manhattan, she procrastinated and did everything but try to help Lee.

Lying in bed the following night, sleep eluded her. She tossed and turned, questioning her opinion of Ainsley. He was bright. She'd always known this. And despite her behavior, she realized now she'd always found him attractive—tall and thin, an expressive face with a small nose, and long, straight blond hair. Unbidden, she remembered his considerable erection.

She remembered meetings they both attended at the agency, and how he often showed her a charming smile. Heat warmed her thighs, wrapping to her core. Her hand fell between her legs, but she shook herself and rolled onto her side. Not tonight. Not Ainsley. As she drifted off toward sleep, she thought, *we share a big problem right now. That is, if he isn't setting me up.* But she couldn't be sure he wasn't the mole.

Cassie googled him, hacked into everything electronic she could find related to him—bank accounts, apartment lease, credit-card expenses—and found nothing to confirm he was, indeed, setting her up. She relaxed.

In the early morning hours, she found herself within a dream about Ainsley. They met by accident in a bar and he hit on her once more. She noticed the bulge in his pants, but this time she responded with a smile and a casual verbal challenge. And in her dream he grinned back and touched her cheek. Without warning, this fantasy brought her a tidal orgasm, leaving the bedsheets soaked under her.

The dream left her confused and unfocused, unhealthy feelings for a lone woman on the run from people who wanted her dead.

It was well after midnight. He'd be asleep in his apartment. She

reached for a newly purchased cell phone and called the cell phone she'd given Lee. Quickly, she composed herself. "Anything on the piece of paper I gave you containing the phone number?"

He sounded sleepy. "Umm. I've been waiting for your call." She waited, listening to silence. "Okay, then. Until you gave me the phone number and the license plates, I had no reason to think about who and what went down in Riyadh. The folks at the agency keep us all in the dark."

Cassie grew impatient but before she could complain, Lee continued. "The number belongs to a satellite phone owned by Pesi Houmaz, the younger brother of Tariq, the Muslim extremist. I found a conversation the agency thought might just be innocent chatter, and did some digging. The conversation was between Pesi in Riyadh and some male voice, also in Riyadh, the day before you had your, ah, problem there."

He coughed and she suspected he felt uncomfortable about the intel he was about to deliver. She steeled herself and sat down at the hotel room's desk.

Ainsley continued, "No one here made the connection. No one even translated it. I know someone at the Saudi country desk. I had her listen to the call and translate it. Told them we're testing her translation accuracy, and wanted to know the exact translation in English. She took the bait and here's what she told me about the conversation. Your name wasn't mentioned, but they discussed a woman with your description. Pesi Houmaz had a detailed list of instructions for your encounter with the unidentified man, including how to get him into your room. Looks like Pesi might have had a copy of your agency file.[\*] We keep so many details on all employees and NOCs we could run a dating service."

Lee waited but Cassie remained silent, impatient for the answer to her questions. After a few seconds, he spoke again. "In the translated conversation, Pesi said, and I quote:

Her call-sign is Swiftshadow, in case you need a way to validate your bona fides. Follow her and find a way to use it. Say you have urgent intel for her agency, and find a way to get into her hotel room with her, for the delivery. When you are in her room, subdue her. Bind her. Do to her whatever you want, but don't end her until you have the information I need.

Ask her the questions I gave you and store her answers for me using the cell phone's recorder function. I must know exactly what she knows, everything she learned when she hacked our computers. Torture her to get her to talk, do anything you want to her.

When you have gotten as much as she will tell, gag her. Carve these words into her chest and abdomen: "Such is the fate of American spies." While she still lives, take proof of her death. A body part, an eye or a nipple will do. I can match it to the DNA profile our mole sent. Place the body part in a dry-cleaning bag from the closet in her room. Retrieve the pointed broom handle from the hotel's linen closet. Bind the bitch's living naked body onto the bed, and hammer the point-end of the broom handle as far up into her vagina as it will go. Use your shoe to pound it into her. Untie her and put the broom bottom through the foot of the bed frame's wooden panel so her dying body is forced by the broomstick to remain in an upright position. Let her suffer as she bleeds to death.

Leave by the hotel service entrance no later than 4 a.m. and wait by the pharmacy just west of the service entrance. Use your cell phone to call "PH" for pick-up at 966-405-5811.

Salaam and may Allah guide you well.

The tone of Lee's voice told her he was more in fear for her than for himself. "That's it. And, as you know, it's the phone number you gave me."

Cassie went limp. She took several deep breaths, got up and walked the room. But as she listened, her knees became more and more unsteady.

She reached out toward a chair to keep from falling to her knees. She sat, shivering in fear, repulsed by thought of dying this way. "Holy shit. My head's spinning." The words Ainsley said continued ringing in her ears. "Thanks, Lee. Now I owe you a favor for sure."

Long after she hung up, her nerves made her jump with every city noise. She didn't think she'd sleep that night, or ever again. Nightmares would surely follow her into bed. She stared out the window all night long until dark turned once again into bright day.

Cassie had previously made dinner plans with Judy Hernandez. She was more afraid than ever, so afraid that the voice inside her whimpered nonstop, telling her not to leave the hotel room, there was danger everywhere. But she felt desperate to find release and hoped being with her friend might relax her.

Just after 6 p.m., Cassie arrived first at Shun Lee Palace near Columbus Circle. She found a seat with the wall at her back and a clear view of the entrance and the rest rooms. Across from her she saw her eyes darting around the room, reflected on the mirrored walls. She feared for her safety so much she could smell the rank odor of her own terror.

Judy arrived and sat at their table, happy and more talkative than usual. She could see that Judy seemed to have her own agenda and didn't notice Cassie's jumpiness.

Over hot-and-sour soup, Judy told her, "I've been thinking a lot about our after-workout encounter. You know, when I...when we...when you and I," and she pointed to Cassie's torso.

"And?" asked Cassie, eager to lose herself in her friend's issues.

Judy shook her head. "I'm gay. You are, too, or at least you're bi."

Cassie frowned. "I have no sex life. No social life. I don't want one. Present company excluded. Imagine me on a date, and the guy squeezes my boob. At best it would be difficult for him to get past the shock. At worst, I have no idea what type of guy would want to be with me after that. But, the last time I had sex with a man, it changed my life in too many bad ways. But yes, I enjoyed our 'encounter.' I'd like another."

After dinner they walked two miles in the heat and humidity to Hernandez's apartment in Chelsea on 20th Street and Ninth Avenue. Perspiration coated both of them when Judy opened the door to her air-conditioned studio. With the lone exception of William Wing's apartment in Hong Kong, Cassie hadn't been in anyone's home in many months. Nowhere but a hotel, a restaurant, or the Y' She found the apartment evocative of past memories. Sorrow at the loss of her apartment so many months ago. Tears budded in the corners of her eyes.

Judy closed the door and pulled Cassie close. With deliberate tenderness, Judy hugged Cassie to her. She moved her lips to Cassie's and they kissed. She lifted Cassie's sweatshirt, exposing one breast. She placed her lips on the erect nipple and Cassie moaned. In seconds, their clothing

was coming off. Judy strapped on a double dildo.

This time Cassie deliberately remained submissive, tried to enjoy being passive, and it paid off for both of them. Cassie let Judy's fingers explore her, reach deep into her, slow and tentative at first, then more insistent. When Cassie tried to respond with her own fingers, Judy said "Shush, Denise. Let me," and pushed Cassie onto her back. Judy said, "Let me have control, okay?" and Cassie nodded, trying as hard as she could to keep her hands from doing to Judy what she wanted them to.

As Judy bent her knees between Cassie's legs and the dildo touched Cassie's womanhood, Cassie clenched her teeth. A quiet moan escaped her lips, soft and full of promise. Judy smiled and deliberately forced the dildo into Cassie, gliding through her core to its hilt. Cassie jolted as its end firmly slapped tight inside her. Judy slithered in and out of Cassie, slowly at first, then faster, harder. Cassie's body shook as her first climax rolled in waves through her.

Judy's lips touched Cassie's. Her hands kneaded Cassie's nipples, and she thrust faster. Judy began building speed, moaning herself as the other end of the dildo stimulated her as well. She fucked Cassie and herself into oblivion, taking each of them to climax again and again. When they were finished, it was sheer physical exhaustion that stopped them.

They climbed into Judy's bed, naked, with Cassie curled in fetal position, her head on Judy's shoulder, her legs wrapped around Judy's waist.

The last thought she had before drifting into sleep was she felt safe and secure tonight, for the first time in months.

## CHAPTER 16

*August 10, 3:35 a.m.  
Judy Hernandez's apartment,  
324 West 23rd Street,  
Manhattan*

She woke with a start as the light came on. Making no sound, five men had entered Judy's apartment. Four of them held Cassie down on the bed, two gripping tight her arms and two holding her legs.

Before Cassie could scream the one she saw directing the others taped a gag over her mouth, while the others tied her hands behind her back with heavy rope and then bound her feet to the bedposts.

She was forced into a painful kneeling position on the bed, their leader holding her bound arms raised painfully high behind her head. Her legs at the hips were twisted almost to the point of breaking. She wasn't able to scream through the gag.

Panicked, she noticed that even with the lights on, her vision seemed dim. Each was dressed in black but none had masks to hide their faces, a bad sign.

She knew she would die tonight and examined her murderers. They all appeared to be Middle Eastern and, as Cassie turned her head toward them, from the corner of her eye she could see they had sliced Judy's throat from ear to ear. Her friend's blood filled the bed. Cassie gasped. No!

She'd never experienced terror like this.

"You will answer my questions." The one she assumed was their leader pulled the gag from her mouth.

Without thinking Cassie spat in his face.

He pushed her back toward the bed and she heard her ankles and hips snap as they broke. A wave of pain crashed over her and the world dimmed.

She sniffed ammonia and saw a rag under her nose. Her captor wiped her saliva from his brow. “Tell me all you know of Houmaz.”

She grimaced through the pain and muttered, “Go to Hell.”

Their leader smiled and kissed the blade of the long knife he held. “You go first. If you won’t be cooperative then—” He popped the gag back into her mouth, held the knife out to her as if offering it to her, but then he withdrew it. Cassie struggled, but was held fast. Her terror grew to a crescendo, echoing her pain. She could hear her heart beat, marking time to the end of her life, as she watched. The voice in her head was so panicked it could make no sound.

Their leader sneered at her. “We won’t rape you, so fear that no longer. Allah has given us other plans for you.” His accent was Middle Eastern but she couldn’t tell from which country he came.

He clutched her neck to stop her from struggling and carved her chest with the sharp knife. “Arabic letters, but I’ll translate for you.” The man continued slicing deep into her, oddly stirring a detached memory of her father, years ago at their home in Half Moon Bay, as he carved a Thanksgiving turkey.

She gasped in pain as the knife punctured her skin, ripping her flesh as he moved it across her chest. She tried desperately to move away as he cut into her torso, but the four others held her tightly in place. He spit out each word as he cut them into her: “Such is the fate of American spies.”

One of them pulled her head back by her hair, just long enough for gripping.

Cassie knew what was coming next and panic overwhelmed her.

The leader said to the others, still holding the knife dripping her blood, “We’ll need proof of what we’ve done.” He fondled her breasts and said, “You will no longer need these.” Quickly, so fast the shock and agony of the act took seconds to register, he sliced the nipple from her left breast. She screamed as pain jolted through her, but again, the gag kept her from making a sound.

He showed her the bloody nipple and she stared back thinking, this can’t be happening to me. But, the throbbing sting registering through her torso replied it was.

He gripped her right breast and caressed its nipple. She flinched in anticipation and once again, watched in shock as he used the knife to rip it



from her. She stared in anguish at the growing stream of her own blood as it seeped down her flattened chest and pooled onto the bed sheet with Judy's.

The leader asked, "Tell us what you did when you stole from us. What did you take? We know you took money. Did you also take anything else?" He removed the gag.

She was too weak to speak. The word came out in a whisper: "Nothing."

"I don't believe you. Your last chance for a painless death. What did you take?"

She opened her mouth. "Noth—"

"Liar!" He took the knife and said to his team, "Hold her head." Without giving her time to think what would next happen to her, he plunged the knife into her right eye socket and carefully carved one of her eyeballs from her head. Again her consciousness dimmed.

Once more she could smell ammonia on the rag under her nose. And again, the pain was beyond anything she'd ever imagined.

From her remaining eye, she watched him place the damaged eyeball in a small wooden box with both her severed nipples. Cassie felt her life draining away. Blood flowed from her empty eye socket, down off her face, hot and wet. Tears flowed from her remaining eye but the gag kept her silent.

"Force her legs open wider so I can finish the work Allah sent us to do." He held a long broomstick with one end sharpened to a point.

She knew what was about to happen, tensing her body and trying to keep her legs closed. Her strength was ebbing away and she felt helpless.

She felt his fingers dig deep into her vaginal lips, parting them, felt the broomstick tear into her, felt a hammer pound the broomstick through her, ripping up through her vagina, penetrating her womb, plowing up through her belly and stopping just below her heart.

The shock of the pain was almost enough to kill her outright, and she blacked out. When she regained consciousness, the tip of the broom's point tugged against her heart's every beat. Her pulse quickened and became erratic.

Breathing rapidly, convulsing in agony, she heard him say words sounding far away, "Raise her up. Move her over the bed's frame and place the end of the broom handle into the frame. Force her upright. Use the

broom. Hurry!”

The room grew foggy. She watched a blur of movement as they left through the open apartment door and vanished. Cassie heard the voice in her head whisper, “Why did I procrastinate? Why didn’t I act against them sooner?”

In a pain-shrouded haze, she felt her pulse skip and stop.

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## CHAPTER 17

*August 10, 3:16 p.m.  
Apartment 11A,  
324 West 23rd Street,  
Manhattan*

Someone was shaking her. “Wake up!”

Cassie’s eyes opened, and shocked, she saw Judy once again alive. She bolted upright, breathless, her pulse faster than if she’d run a marathon. “What happened to me?”

Judy shook her head, saying, “You were asleep and then you began flailing and screaming louder than a banshee. Scared the shit out of me. Probably woke everyone on this floor of the building.”

The red LED alarm clock blinked. It was just after 3 a.m. Her attention remained riveted on the dream. She could still feel her mutilated body, bleeding, throbbing, dying. Still see the faces of the men who so brutally tortured her to death.

It was as real as anything that had ever happened to her.

First her career had been blasted from her. Then her face had been changed to something hateful. She’d been forced to tear her baby from her belly. And run for her life. Now, her life had just been ripped from her forever.

Slowly, the room became normal, its colors less vivid, and the pain she’d experienced in dying melted away.

Now, she felt different, changed from the way she’d been. Broken in some major way.

She felt she’d died.

And now she was reborn.

She took a deep breath and looked at Judy. “I’m truly sorry. I almost

never have nightmares.” She kissed Judy’s brow and forced a smile. “Won’t happen again, I hope.” She hugged Judy close and settled her friend back into bed next to her. Cassie was afraid to close her eyes, fearful of dreaming.

I’m a danger to anyone who keeps me company. I can’t see Judy again until I succeed in eliminating the people who want me dead.

It was then she realized she was now committed to the path. This dream was the big message. Kill them before they kill me and those I care about.

\* \* \*

Cassie sat by the window of the elegant Algonquin Hotel at 59 West 44th Street, recommended by Andrea Brown’s *Writers’ & Artists’ Hideouts*. She thought how ironic it was that the hotel was legendary for the writers who’d stayed there, yet she’d discarded her disguise and her cover as a writer. She tossed the book in the room’s trash can. No longer needed.

Her work now was more serious: the planning preceding a military operation. During the late morning, Cassie opened the project-planning software on her cell phone and created the initial pieces of a plan designed to eliminate the Muslim extremists she believed were still searching to murder her.

Cassie was taught at The Farm that every effective project plan starts with a list of tasks and the resources required to complete each task. The plan would give her an overview of the cost and time to complete the project. A roadmap. She saw her plan to eliminate the Muslim extremists as a project.[1] Cassie worked compulsively, taking breaks when her bodily needs left her too distracted. Gradually, she made progress.

She assembled a list of the overall phases of the project, and then filled in the tasks under each phase. The plan required a large team to execute it. Cassie estimated the time in calendar days and total staff required to complete each phase. She frowned and began editing it. As the afternoon passed into evening, she fleshed out her first incomplete draft.

Night dawned into day. She continued working, not eating or going to the bathroom until there was pain in her bladder or her stomach growled. She rarely got up from the chair. She took hot showers, ate, went to the

bathroom, then slept until she awoke to begin anew, working until she was too numb to think.

It took Cassie another day to hone a complete draft of the plan. When she pressed the commands on her cell phone, the planning software produced a Gantt chart and a PERT chart.

The Gantt chart displayed staffing levels by activity. It showed the timeline to completion was much too long, and she guessed she could never remain alive for so many years.

The PERT chart showed the sequence of all the events in the plan—which events she needed to complete before starting others. This chart depicted her many faulty assumptions, inconsistent uses of the staff she'd have to assemble, and empty spots where she'd need more staff.

Damn. She'd have to try harder. But at least she had an entire outline, and with that completed, Cassie felt emotionally drained and exhausted. She slept through the afternoon and didn't wake until nearly noon the next day. Finally refreshed, she had coffee, showered, and continued working to correct the multitude of faulty assumptions in her first draft.

As evening fell the next day, Cassie examined the charts and frowned. She felt like pulling out her hair, her hands clenching in frustration. It shouldn't be this difficult to create a practical plan, she thought.

The plan required twenty million dollars and needed over 300 people, with skills ranging from hackers to intel experts to mercenary soldiers. How can I even hope to fund it?

But the most serious problem with the plan was that she'd be exposed from the time she initiated assembling her army until the operation was completed. And it was almost inevitable that word of what she was doing would leak. From then on, she would be easy prey for her targets.

To succeed, everyone involved in setting up and carrying out the military operation must remain in seclusion until the operation commenced. Keeping a secret for a year, and keeping soldiers hidden while they trained for almost two months—it just wasn't practical.

In fact, it was crazy. Surely an act of desperation by a schizoid woman.

Of course, if a miracle occurred, she might remain alive until the plan was ready for its final execution. And then she'd either be free or dead. The overall odds of success for the massive black operation was worse than 50-50.

Cassie examined each task in every phase to see if manpower requirements could be adjusted to begin sooner or run in less time. By adding four more bodies, upping the total from nineteen to twenty-three in the “hacker” category, she reduced the time to completion from ten to seven months.

But doing so required that she partner with Lee Ainsley as one of the additional resources. Cassie pondered the implications of working closely with him for that long, the complications of her growing feelings for him, and a vague mistrust she still held, not knowing for sure if he was the agency mole. Cassie sighed. It was too late for this kind of second-guessing. She had to decide what to do about him right now.

“Either I act or I die,” she whispered aloud, remembering her dream.

The plan would need to direct blame away from her and the mercenary army she planned to raise and run. To provide her and her mercs with cover, Cassie needed to steal the ammo from the agency’s own inventory. She intended to implicate the agency in the Muslim extremist takedown, in a very public way. Her personal desire was to ensure that the US government stop subsidizing terrorism and begin fighting it once again.

There would be fallout. She expected the terrorists would be livid when they discovered the United States took such a direct role in destroying their operations.

Cassie used the thumb-drive containing intelligence from the agency to study current weapons technology, especially small arms. She researched arms manufacturers’ websites and chat rooms. For the assaults she had planned, Ruger Mini-14s modified as fully automatic weapons would be best. Killing with an unmodified Ruger took more time because each trigger press emitted one shot. But when modified, these weapons could spit over ninety rounds per minute.

If she got the agency’s standard unrifled barrels for the Rugers, they would send their bullets spinning end over end into a person, as opposed to rifling through a person. A Ruger, then, wasn’t as accurate as rifled automatic pistols, but just one hit would disable its target. Although rifled bullets did damage twisting into and through flesh, an unrifled Ruger did massive damage, removing entire limbs, compared with what would otherwise be just a bloody but clean wound from rifled weapon such as an AK-74, the updated version of the old AK-47. If the bullet from a Ruger hit

someone's bone, instead of crushing through it and exiting the body, it would twist its way, climbing up the flesh, wrapping against the bone, knotting the muscle tissue tightly for six or seven inches.

After two days of additional editing, she had a plan in final form that would take just over four months to execute, from the day she began recruiting mercs to its end with either her or the Muslim extremists dead.

Cassie thought about the enormity of her project and the role she must play in all this. Her only alternative at this point was run away forever. She shrugged. The die was cast, as Julius Caesar once said. So be it. With this thought, a chill crept up her spine.

She reviewed the plan and made her most important decision: I'll have to involve Lee in this, up to his hip boots. I just hope I'm not making a mistake. Is he the mole?

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## CHAPTER 18

*August 12, 10:19 a.m.  
Apartment 11A,  
326 East 23rd Street,  
Chelsea section of Manhattan*

Cassie steeled herself to the risk that Ainsley represented. Toward the end of the morning, she dialed the cell she'd given him.

Lee answered on the first ring and she heard him walking, office noises diminishing around him. "Hang on. Gonna find a less public place. Just got some coffee from the lobby vendor. If I'd been upstairs I would have missed the call. One of the lobby guards would've had the cell. Can't take them past security." She heard his footsteps and then silence. "Okay. I'm ready. Missed me much?" he asked with a smirk Cassie couldn't see but could feel.

"Not your personality, just certain body parts which I was introduced to when I patted you down for weapons at our date." She turned serious. "I have a request you alone can fulfill. And there's good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

Ainsley chuckled. "Me alone? Ouch. So what's the good news?"

"If you agree to play an active role in the operation, we might just succeed in eliminating the Houmaz brothers and their Muslim extremists. Kill them all, I mean."

"That sounds a bit ambitious. What makes you believe 'we' can do this? It'll take an army. Uh, what's the request? And then, what's the bad news?"

"Well, Lee, I need you personally and immediately involved in the op, like your life depends on it, or it isn't even worth trying. They'll eventually find and kill either you or me or both of us. What's your pleasure?"



Lee was silent for almost a half a minute. “I guess you can count me in.”

She shook her head, anger building in her. “Not good enough. I need your absolute and immediate commitment to do whatever I ask, or the op doesn’t start.”

Silence. “Sheesh. Okay. I’m in all the way. Ever been told you can be a real bitch on wheels?”

Cassie tried to stifle a laugh and it came out more as a snort which went on for a while.

She breathed deep to steady herself, but suddenly her mind split in half. She was no longer in control of her words. She heard herself say, “Yes, almost every day. Usually by men during sex. One even tried to kill me when he raped me in Riyadh, but, just like a praying mantis, he died right after his orgasm.”

“Very funny. What can I do to get this kick-started?”

“I need a list of about three hundred names, email addresses, street addresses, and phone numbers for retired ops agents, and for militia and mercenaries the agency has had good results with. They all must be in good physical shape and want money badly enough to risk death to get it. I’ll need at least two and preferably three grade-A hackers, preferably ones from the Devcon groups or Anonymous.” The Devcons were the world’s best hackers. Anonymous was the group that supported Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks organization. “How soon can you assemble the lists?”

Ainsley whistled. “You have anything easier?”

Cassie’s breath blew out in frustration. The list of tasks was endless and the probability of success so low. Her reply was blunt. “That is the easy task. And I have a few that will be tough.”

This time the silence on Lee’s end of the line went on for a longer time. “One calendar week to ten days should be enough time for the list of hackers. And two weeks for the list of mercs, but I can deliver both in bits and pieces starting in about one week. I have access to all of the agency’s lists, but the lists only contain contact info. The hard work will be vetting them. Next?”

She felt this one would be Lee’s real test of commitment. “The bad news is I’ll need to arrange purchase of some specialty items in bulk quantities from the agency’s suppliers. And you’ll have to do this since

you're still with the agency and I'm not." She read the list from the screen of her cell. "At least a hundred Ruger Mini-14s with 300,000 rounds of ammo, and the ammo must be traceable back to the agency, at least a hundred Kevlar vests, several satellite transponders with at least ten radio-oriented beachball antennas, and a hundred satellite phones designed for covert use. Oh, and I'll need a covert training site in a desert setting anywhere, but not in the Middle East."

Silence from Lee. Suddenly she heard him sigh. "This isn't an op you're assembling. This is an army! When did you win the lottery? You're crazy. Who's paying for all this?"

"I am," she lied. She'd tell him how she was financing this later, when she'd worked it out and they were face to face. If she could think of a way, that is. "Lee, it's a strike force. Small, compact. Certainly not an army. The voice in her head approved of what she said but she wondered if Lee would accept her logic. She waited and no sound came from him. "When can you have the stuff?"

She could hear him swallowing the coffee.

"I'll send your website an email message from my untraceable account at hushmail.com by the end of this week, with a plan for provisions and the first draft of the hacker and attacker contact info. Good enough?"

Cassie breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes. And thanks Lee. I'm sorry I never had a chance to work with you before."

"Yeah, well, I better start reviewing my West Point course work. Sounds like I'm gonna need it."

She was about to end the conversation, relieved at finally beginning the long process of recovering her life, when Ainsley said, "Wait, Cassie. I have an update for you about the blowing of your cover."

It took Cassie a few seconds to downshift. She steadied herself, worried about what she was about to hear. Maybe she really could trust him. "Okay, Lee, what have you got?"

He hesitated for a few seconds, and she heard him gulp. She wondered why he hesitated. "I traced a well-disguised message from one of the secure terminals in the agency basement to a covert 'listserv' in the Middle East. I tried to trace it further, but no luck. And because the message was weeks old, cleaning crews had been through the basement terminal area at least twenty times, so no fingerprints and no DNA. The message from the

basement terminal claimed you were seen on television news leaving an abortion clinic in San Mateo, California. And I remember seeing that news report. It's when I tried finding you."

It was proof there really was a mole. The air left her lungs in a gasp, as she remembered that day with crystal clarity. When Lee uttered the word "abortion," her thought process froze and she felt herself totally split in two. She didn't even hear the rest of what he'd said. It was as if she had separated from herself and watched some unfamiliar person feel the panic growing inside her. The other part of her hurt like she'd been stabbed deep in her stomach. She sat stock still, unable to breath, unable to respond for a few seconds, her mouth working and no noise coming from her.

But Lee just kept going. "So someone here alerted them before the news story was more than ten hours old. When I watched that footage on television, the talking heads identified you as one of their staff. It's how I was able to backtrace your cell phone calls."

When she didn't respond, his voice got louder and its pitch got higher. "Are you still there?"

Cassie's voice sounded like a mouse squeak, coming from someone else. She heard her voice, fumbled words in a high-pitched voice. "Lee, the assassin who tried to kill me in Riyadh raped me and impregnated me before I killed him. I was there for...I was..."

She sobbed, out of control. "I had an abortion, Lee. I murdered my unborn baby." Cassie heaved loud sobs from deep within her, a place where she was beyond self-control. "Lee, I'll call you in a couple of days. Thanks, Lee. Thanks very much. Thanks, Lee." She ended the call and sat sobbing, her head in her hands.

## CHAPTER 19

*August 16, 12:06 p.m.  
Agency headquarters,  
K Street, Washington, DC*

When Lee Ainsley terminated the call, he was stunned and shaken by Cassie's tone. His face went slack as he considered her emotions. It surprised him so vividly to feel her distress, but other emotions followed close behind, and he couldn't find any way to guard himself from those.

He needed to decide now. Did he want to help her? Or help her killers? If he helped her, there was a tiny chance they'd both survive. And if he helped her killers, there was a chance they'd be satisfied. But maybe not, and then he'd be fending them off himself. No chance of survival then. He considered the outcomes, trying to let logic drive his choice.

But in the end, it was his growing feelings for her that did him in. He shook his head, thinking how he'd always been easy prey to dangerous women.

He felt confusion ruling him.

What should he do now? He dropped off the cell phone with the security guard and walked to the elevator bank. He pressed the Up button and waited.

The elevator doors opened and closed before he willed himself to move. He waited for the next one, his breath blowing out in a sigh. Sheesh.

He hadn't realized she was so damaged. He changed his mind on eating lunch in the cafeteria. He needed to get out and clear his head. Pouring rain outside, sky gray. But first go up to my office and get an umbrella. Maybe then get a bite to eat. Sushi sounds good. And while I eat, I can think through the logistics to her demands. Where can I find the military materiel she demands?

The elevator lights blinked in the lobby. Someone was now descending from the floor of the conference room he'd sat in with other agency information technology directors before he'd left to get coffee.

He tilted his head to see which elevator would arrive next. He expected the one he'd just missed to stop at the lobby before returning up again.

But the elevator descended to the basement. Only director-level personnel now had access to the terminals there. Whoa! It was possible, but not probable. Was whoever transmitted the other messages to the Middle East transmitting or receiving a message right now?

Lee rode an elevator to his desk on the fifth floor where he activated the "Copy" program he'd installed on the basement workstations, setting them to save every keystroke made by anyone using any of the basement terminals. It might not be the mole. There are classified files stored in the basement cabinets, and agency server hardware is there. Staff might have been sent to maintain those, or maybe just find a paper file.

But Lee hoped this was what he'd waited for.

He ran to the staircase and took the steps two at a time down six floors to the basement.

Edging the staircase door ajar just far enough for him to peek through, he could see whoever had been there had vanished. He touched each seat in the room until he found one still warm. Lee went to the supply cabinet and pulled a roll of Scotch tape from it. Then off to the printer where he pulled a few blank sheets of paper from the input stack. He headed back to the keyboard adjacent to the recently used chair. He pressed pieces of tape to the keys and pulled them off, scanning each to see if it held a fingerprint. When he was done, he had several pieces of tape stuck lightly to a sheet of paper. He placed the page within a thin stack of paper and folded it gently, putting the pages in his suit pocket. Fingerprints and possible bits of DNA. But where could he find a place to process the evidence? Who'd sold Cassie out?

He focused on his breathing as he eased the basement door closed and sprinted back up the stairs to the fifth floor. In his office, he waited another minute and the "Copy" program flashed "Done" on his screen, indicating the mole had signed off the network. Hands shaking, Lee copied the files from his desktop computer onto a 32- megabyte USB miniSD flash drive identical to Cassie's and placed the drive into a lead-lined hidden recess

within the sole of his left shoe.

But before Lee sped away he was struck by the realization this might be the last time he'd ever be in the agency's office building.

He removed the USB flash from the shoe and hooked it back to his desktop. Lee copied all the other files he thought he might ever need. Everything, including unvetted lists of all the agency's retired hackers and independent hacker contractors, all the retired black ops personnel and black ops contractors. The rough lists of everything he'd have to build for Cassie—over 10,000 names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers.

It would easily take him as long as he'd told her to narrow down the info. But not from this computer. Not in this building. Bye-bye forever.

He took the elevator, smiling innocently at the fellow agency employees and directors he met. In the lobby he retrieved his cell phone from the guard. Lee headed out the door and into heavy rain. He'd forgotten his umbrella.

He sprinted to a taxi. "Take me to Georgetown University, to the library." This library was one he knew well, and near his apartment. He'd occasionally used it for the privacy of its study cubicles. It took him ten minutes to get there, enter the library, and find an empty cubicle.

Lee sat and read the text and the "send to" point for the message, and his eyes popped open wide. Oh, shit.

As fast as he could, he punched in Cassie's cell phone number from a pay phone in the library by the restrooms.

While he waited for the phone to ring, he shivered in fear. Cassie, pick up, pick up now! Cassie, where the bloody fuck are you? Please, pick up. Please, please. The ringing went on, two rings, three, four. Shit. Pick up.

She did. He heard the click when she accepted his call. Lee didn't wait for her voice. "Cassie, it's Lee. They backtraced your phone call with me just now, so there is probably a team of killers heading to you wherever the hell it is you are. Leave now! Leave as fast as you can. Destroy your cell phone, it's traceable. I'll contact you via your website. They probably made me as well by now but if not, this call is traceable. I'm not safe here anymore. I'm not safe anywhere. Can't go back to the agency...ever. Okay?" Seconds passed. "Cassie, are you there?" He heard no response at the other end. "Shit, Cassie, tell me you're still alive, damn you."

He heard her say in a flat voice, “Yes. Thanks.”

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## CHAPTER 20

*August 18, 9:06 a.m.  
Home of the local mullah,  
Upper Pachir, Nangarhar Province,  
Afghanistan*

In the village of Upper Pachir, thirty miles southeast of Jalalabad, in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, Tariq Houmaz stood and looked out the compound's window at the poverty-stricken hillside scab, where, for centuries, war was the profession practiced by those who rose to power and riches. He thought, here, 'power' means the rule over life and death.

He mused how, over the centuries, merchants who had discovered spices and opium growing wild in the hills always had a reason to kill. And for almost a thousand years, nothing had changed the people who cultivated poppy crops whenever the land was damp enough to yield its bounty.

There was such poverty almost no one knew how to read or write.

The few with talent to read, called mullahs, studied just the Koran. They dictated what the law required and through their interpretations controlled everyone's behavior. There was little consistency from one mullah to the next, but their interpretation was the ultimate law. No one who violated the Koran went unpunished.

Every warlord "owned" a mullah.

He mourned the savageness of those living in the village below his hillside. They all lived in one-room huts, housing multiple-generation families.

And then there was the cloistered compound where the powerful regional warlord lived. Big enough to house fifty people, the luxurious walled residence had a central courtyard. Those living within its walls were soldiers. The conference room was over thirty feet long and almost as wide,



bigger than any of the village huts.

Tariq Houmaz faced into the room and sat at the head of the old olive-wood conference table, a guest of the warlord of the Eastern Shura region, Hazret Ali. Ali's mullah, Maukvi Muhammed Khalis, stood with his back to the wall, listening carefully to every word uttered at this meeting. Houmaz stroked his beard while his direct reports gave him status updates. He touched the elegant wood top of the conference room table. It was almost two hundred years old, carved by hand long ago by serfs of the warlord's ancestors.

The man speaking to him, an oily, swarthy banker whose odor permeated the room, said, "We believe the American President will fund this activity if we limit the death and destruction of property to under one-third of what we originally planned. He is still upset one of our cells destroyed an entire city block, when he had originally been told we would destroy only one building."

Houmaz shifted to resettle himself and waved one hand with his fingers pointed toward the chalkboard. "Such are the fortunes of war. It was his idea to become a 'war president.' We needed backup in case one device failed. Praise Allah, both exploded. But if the idiot wants us to lie to him, first get his money and then we'll kill them all anyway. It will be our biggest success to date. Oh, and tell him it will happen three days later than we're currently planning the event. If we're lucky, he'll still be at the White House. Ah, and to make it even better, have the event occur when he plans to have the stooge governing Afghanistan there to visit him."

Houmaz smiled at the thought of all the death he and his brother Pesi were planning. His mind drifted to the young woman pouring mint tea for those present at the table. He imagined what she would feel like under him a few hours from now. He smiled again, this time looking at the black locks of hair that fell from under her veil to the tops of his hands as she moved away. He reached his hand toward her when a man came running into the room without knocking, a satellite phone in his hand. Houmaz took the phone and the man left without saying a word. Houmaz held the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

"Tariq, it's Pesi. This is urgent. Our mole in Washington sent me a new message. I've got a fresh lead on the bitch who hacked us. I have her current location."

Tariq Houmaz smiled. His hand fell away from the woman pouring tea. "Where is she?"

"At the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street in Manhattan, near Sixth Avenue. I've sent a four-man squad in a van to take her so we can deal with her privately as we had planned. They left from our safe house near Columbus Circle three minutes ago. I'll report again when we've trussed her."

Tariq thought for a second about his brother's suspect reliability in conducting operations. "No. Let me know just before you kill her. I'll want to say goodbye. Remember, Pesi, before she is allowed to die we must know if she hacked our plans when she stole our money. Then you can play with her."

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## CHAPTER 21

*August 18, 9:11 a.m.  
Algonquin Hotel, Times Square,  
59 West 44th Street,  
Manhattan*

A rising panic guided Cassie's practiced movements. It ground all thought and feeling from her. The voice in her head spoke calmly to her, reminding her of what she must do. Without thinking she dropped her cell phone on the floor and smashed it with her booted heel. This simple movement plus fear adrenalized her. She took a deep breath to reassert focus and control.

She put all the documents she needed to plan her operation into the attaché case, closed and locked its lid. Then she donned her homeless outfit. In less than two minutes she looked like a filthy old man complete with a gray curly beard.

Cassie reached under her pillow, extracted the Beretta and attached its silencer. She placed a fresh clip into the gun and then chambered one of the bullets. She ejected the clip and loaded another bullet into the empty space in it, giving her one extra bullet, for a total of eleven. She replaced the clip, pulled the safety off, and pulled back the hammer. It was now ready to fire.

Cassie placed the gun, her last burner cell, and her attaché case in a paper shopping bag topped with rags, and bolted from the room.

She had to get to the locker in the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The one that held all her emergency files and equipment. Her life depended on those files. That is, if she lived through this.

She'd identified an escape route when she checked into the hotel. Running to the stairwell, she descended three flights of stairs to the building's service exit at the alleyway just short of 44th Street.

Opening the door, she saw a rat scurry into a pile of garbage. She

wrinkled her nose, nostrils filling with the stench of rotting waste mixed with the scent of urine. She stared toward the street as clouds obscured the sun, casting everything into shades of gray. All dark—the windows, dirt-pocked concrete beneath her feet, and soot-blackened brickwork that towered around her on three sides.

She stood in shade and moved close to the building exterior wall on the east side, blending in within the dark shadows.

A black van came hurtling down the street to a screeching stop in front of her hotel. Cassie gasped, hugged the side of the building and inched toward the street.

Three Middle Eastern men ran from the van into the hotel, wearing raincoats to conceal what looked like the obvious bulges from weapons. One of them carried a broom handle with its end sharpened to a point.

Cassie had expected to feel fear now, but only disappointment and frustration haunted her as once again she was threatened with death. She sighed. The voice told her it was just another day in her surreal life.

She thought about her escape route. Was it safe yet or should she wait another minute before shuffling into the street. She assumed there was just the driver in the van, but would he recognize her from her flight from her Washington apartment? What if he had a cell phone to call the others? Of course he does. What if there were more in the vehicle waiting for her to flee? Shit, I'm wasting time.

She marched toward the street, camouflaged by shade and the dark brickwork. She listened for noise of her pursuers but heard only the din from the nearby street.

She watched for a thickening of the crowd where she could lose herself. But as she reached the sidewalk she heard the door she'd just gone through scrape open and slam closed. She turned and saw the three men exit the building close behind her.

Clouds split open and sunlight lit her up, now beige against the charcoal brickwork. Shit. Exposed. One of them pointed at her and said something in Arabic. His words didn't carry to her over the street-side clamor, but she knew instantly she'd been made. Damn. Costume didn't fool them.

As she faced them, everything since the night in Riyadh flashed through her memory. She shook with uncontrollable rage. Always being

hunted.

Her hand fumbled with the gun in the raincoat pocket. As if in a dream, she gripped the gun with both hands in a shooter's stance and took aim.

It was as if she watched herself from above.

She saw them draw AK-74 automatics from their holsters as her disembodied self took aim and shot the men, every one, three smothered pops in rapid succession before they could kill her. Those same street-side noises muffled the gunshots in the alley. She watched tiny holes pop open in the tops of each head, crimson dripping down their foreheads. Three bull's-eyes in less than two seconds. Their bodies dropped onto the concrete alleyway.

She was now a serial killer. Damn. How had she managed to hit all three, each with a single shot? She'd only had six weeks of firearms training at The Farm and that was three years ago.

The voice in the back of her head commanded: Flee!

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## CHAPTER 22

*August 18, 9:18 a.m.  
Algonquin Hotel, Times Square,  
59 West 44th Street,  
Manhattan*

The van was right in front of her, gray against the black street. She sprinted to it and aimed through its window. She could see the driver reaching for a handgun. She yelled, “Fuck you!” and fired the gun once through the window glass.

As the bullet had passed through the window, it had disfigured and turned into a more damaging gunshot. The pane shattered wide open and the driver’s head exploded, sending a fountain of blood and bits of his brains and skull spraying onto the other window behind his slumping corpse.

She opened the door, pulled the driver’s body into the street, and dumped it there. Cassie glanced at his head, or the bits of shredded flesh still attached to his neck. She did a double-take at the limp corpse, the damage she’d wreaked. She gasped as she got in.

She moved herself across the bloody seat and sat behind the wheel. As she gunned the engine she could hear police sirens, distant and growing closer. Cassie drove the van over the driver’s body, continuing at breakneck speed seven blocks to the Port Authority Bus Terminal and she left the van double-parked in the street.

She hurried to the men’s room, where she removed the beard and the remainder of her bloody disguise. There was splashback from the driver all over the raincoat. Blood, brain, bits of flesh, and flecks of bone dotted her face and right hand.

Her fingers smelled like the Beretta—the sulfur smell of Hell. She

washed the raincoat in the bathroom and then washed her hands and her face. Several homeless men were camped out on the floor of the men's room. None moved or spoke; they just lay where they were, silently watching her. Cassie turned and faced them and they all looked away. She noticed for the first time she was coated with sweat. Her body stank from the fear she never knew she'd felt.

She stood at the mirror, breathless for a few minutes as the adrenaline rush subsided.

Still numb, she changed her blouse while the men watched. Emerging from the men's room as a punk female wearing a purple spiked wig, she moved as if in a dream. She walked to the locker and removed her rolling suitcase, then as she packed the dripping old raincoat in a plastic bag and dropped it into her case.

My best move now is to meet with Ainsley as soon as possible.

On to the ticket counter. "Next bus to Washington DC, please," she said clicking a wad of chewing gum. She took two Franklins from the inside pocket of her blouse and paid for the ticket.

It was an hour before the next bus left for Washington. Cassie found an out-of-the-way place to sit. She was breathing hard, but not from panic. Her thoughts kept returning to setting her shooter's stance. The feel of the gun, squeezing the trigger. The kickback of the tiny explosions as the bullets flew from the barrel.

A long time passed before she was back in control. When she'd murdered Abdul in Riyadh, it was self-defense. This was self-defense too, but there was a big difference. This time she felt no regrets.

In fact, she was elated. This time, it felt so fine. Wow, it was great. Better than sex! My first battle to regain my life. She'd enjoyed watching the men who were there to kill her as she took their lives instead. She gulped, thinking how transformed she was. Uncle Misha truly lives inside me!

Cassie hummed an old blues tune from Blind Blake, "That'll Never Happen No More." She felt no sense of conscience and even better, the voice in her head was jubilant. When the door opened in the station to the bus-boarding platforms, she drifted in quiet bliss up the rows of seats and sat at the emergency exit near the back of the bus. As the bus rolled through the tunnel toward New Jersey, she came to terms with what she'd become.

Better she accepted and embraced version two of herself: amazon warrior. The old version, however, still lurked within her, writhing in chaos.

\* \* \*

Sitting in the Georgetown University library, it didn't take Lee Ainsley long to figure it out. He knew he'd never go to his apartment. Ever again. He didn't want to die, and if they messed up killing Cassie, he was next on their list. And he really, really hoped they didn't kill her.

He paced the library waiting for her to contact him, praying she had escaped. Until recently, he'd rarely been afraid. Working in network security was just a great job. He'd never been subjected to any of the dangers that operatives live through. He knew he was good at his job.

But he felt unsure of himself in this, his new role. He'd been a lieutenant in the army before his placement into the agency. He'd not held a gun since his tenure years ago as a West Point undergrad.

The unexpected emotions surging through his body left him uncertain of everything in his life. Although he understood his judgment was compromised, the knowledge didn't help.

It was still raining when the library closed, and he was forced outside. Lee wondered where to find safety. He'd no operations or survival skills and less than fifty dollars. After today, his credit cards and ATM card would be marked and tracked. He walked three blocks, found a bank ATM where he drew out \$500, the maximum the machine would give him. Then to another bank ATM, where he used his only credit card for a \$500 cash advance.

He was certain they'd recorded his transactions on the security cameras. He knew he must leave now, as fast as possible, and go far away. He trotted off, watching for the street-cams that were almost everywhere in the nation's capital.

First he jogged to the bus terminal where, weeks ago on Cassie's advice, he'd stashed an attaché case in a locker. Lee pulled the case and checked its contents. There was a hoard of electronics equipment including a second burner cell, multiple patch cords to connect it to anything else electronic, and enough clothing to last a week. And a small unregistered Glock 9mm semiautomatic pistol, its clip fully loaded.



Cassie had told him that everyone in covert ops had a “go bag,” a secret stash of survival clothes and tools. He was surprised to have to use his.

Lee took the case and hurried into the bus terminal men’s room, where he changed into blue jeans and a dark blue polo shirt. He tossed his business suit, white shirt, and tie into the wastebasket.

He tried making himself appear older through the application of talcum powder in his blond hair. Looking in the mirror he shook his head. “Looks ridiculous,” he mumbled. He left the bus terminal and walked west, just as Cassie arrived and debarked from a bus less than two hundred feet away. They passed within thirty feet of each other, but disguised, neither recognized the other.

He noticed the rain hadn’t stopped and bought an umbrella. Then he hurried out the exit into the downpour. About four blocks away, he found a café with a wireless connection.

He bought and gulped down a coffee of the day, burning the back of his throat, and winced. He’d been a good student, but had never done anything spectacular. He wondered if he could learn enough fast enough to survive. Never taught me this at Santa Barbara High School. And in college at West Point I studied troop movements and materiel logistics, not counter-surveillance.

He ordered a second café americano and carefully sipped it. All he knew about how to handle himself she’d taught him. What if it wasn’t enough? It felt alien to him, using store window reflections to tell if someone was pursuing him. He opened his notebook computer and tried to focus on something else, anything to distract him from his unraveling life.

Exhausted, drained from fleeing unknown dangers, his mind wandered randomly, seeking a safe time in his past, eventually falling back to his senior prom. He felt the tuxedo collar tight against his neck, seeing the bow tie in the mirror, buckling the cummerbund, and fastening the corsage to Sondra Sandovar’s wrist. He looked into her adoring eyes, but found Cassie’s staring back with concern. Lee jolted awake, steaming coffee spilling down his left hand.

What had he gotten himself into? Now it was all about saving Cassandra as well as himself. The first step was completing a plan and obtaining resources to offer a route to success.

He connected to the Internet and started the first phase of his research for Cassie. Lee forced himself to ignore his feelings of concern for her, his fingers flying over the keyboard as fast as he could.

\* \* \*

Since the cell phone she'd destroyed in New York was compromised, she assumed Ainsley's cells were also compromised. It would be contact by leaving messages at her website's email function. To keep the emails from being monitored by the feds' ECHELON system, she and Lee would only open draft emails and write within the drafts, never sending any. She'd given him instructions on how to do this.

Cassie went to the bus terminal restroom and changed into business clothes wearing a 34-D bra stuffed with paper towels, heavy mascara, and a red wig, making her look twenty years older. Less than ten minutes before, Lee had been in the men's restroom only twenty feet away. She lost track of time as she stood there, collecting and calming herself by deep-breathing.

She passed Lee as she left the restroom, but he didn't look anything like the man she'd begun to trust and once again, she failed to recognize him. Hurrying to a dark corner of the bus terminal, she watched the others from her bus as they left the terminal. No one following me. The rain had just stopped when Cassie emerged from the bus terminal into the hot, humid Washington night.

Washington. This was where, so short a time ago, she first realized she was hip-deep in shit. She'd fled then. And now she was in shit up to her chin.

Cassie took a taxicab to the Mandarin Oriental, a fancy hotel on Maryland Avenue near the Capitol building. She booked a room, identifying herself as Susan Blumenthal, using an identity she had stolen wholesale from a sixtyish woman shopping in Manhattan's Saks Fifth Avenue for clothing several weeks ago. Cassie had manufactured forged credit cards and copied the woman's driver's license from a picture she took using her cell phone's camera. The real person lived in Darien, Connecticut.

Her hotel room had free wireless Internet access. She entered and closed the door, relaxed in an overstuffed chair with her cell phone. She checked her website's email function for news from Ainsley. And there it

was, in the “drafts” folder:

I’m holed up at a café near Smithsonian Air & Space. Pay phone inside Starbucks is 202-889-7691. Have thought of a solution for cell phone problem, but now I’m homeless too. Please call before they throw me out of here or I drink too much coffee and begin spilling my guts to anyone who’ll listen.

—L. A.

Cassie laughed. At least he hadn’t lost his sense of humor over his pending execution.

She took the elevator down and found a bank of pay phones in the hotel lobby. She dialed the number he’d given her. “Lee?”

“Thank heaven you’re okay.” She could hear him sigh. “What’s next?”

She thought for just a moment. “Come to me. Take three taxis, one anywhere out of town, then walk at least a mile before finding one to Government Center, and then walk again another mile before you get a cab to the Mandarin Oriental, 1330 Maryland Avenue SW. Room 312. Make sure you aren’t followed. I’m registered as Susan Blumenthal. Cassie out.”

She returned to the room, exhausted, vulnerable, and worried. Was Ainsley up to the task of the surveillance detection runs needed to get to her undetected?

The old version of herself emerged, feeling dirty from the murders she’d committed, as if she would spoil anything she touched. Cassie walked to the bathroom shower. Without thinking, she undressed and removed her wig and makeup. She found herself in the shower, obsessively scrubbing herself. That little voice in her head hummed “Death Letter Blues” by Son House. She sang along to the story of loss.

She remembered Evan’s mother, sitting in a folding chair by his grave as they lowered his coffin into the pit. Cassie’s tears mixed with the water flowing from the showerhead. She fell to the floor and bawled.

## CHAPTER 23

*August 18, 4:35 p.m.  
Mandarin Oriental, Room 312,  
1330 Maryland Avenue SW,  
Washington, DC*

A half hour later, Cassie once more felt strong. She finished toweling off as she heard a tapping at the door. She donned a white terrycloth hotel robe and snatched the silenced Beretta just in case. Cassie opened the door. There he stood, his hair slicked gray from the talcum powder. The makeup covering his face was bleeding from the rain.

He looked ludicrous. Sudden irrational anger rose up in her. Somehow she saw him as the source of her failed life in a very disconnected piece of logic. Lee's eyes were riveted on the gun in her hand. He stepped back into the hallway.

Cassie snarled, "Were you followed?"

Lee gulped. "I don't think so. I did everything you told me to." She heard the elevator door open down the hall. Cassie pulled Lee into the room and closed the open door almost all the way, leaving it open a crack, peering out. Whoever had entered their floor was walking away. She heard a door open and close. Cassie shook her head, thinking, can't be too careful.

She closed the room's door and faced him, fury and fear at war on her face.

Lee backed further away from her. "You okay? I was worried about you."

Cassie looked at Lee as if she hadn't been aware he was there. In her room's mirror she saw her expression, reflecting the confusion on her face.

She tried to focus, to be normal, but a flurry of contradictory emotions flew through her. She still felt anger, but when she opened her mouth, the

words she spoke were warm and caring. “Lee, I was so worried.” Cassie tried to stop herself. It wasn’t safe for her to express warmth for anyone, especially him.

She tried to speak again but her mind and her feelings swirled without focus. Her lips moved without emitting a sound. One thought sprang to the surface: her life was a sham and a ruin. But she found herself hugging him against her, her grip fierce, tears falling as she sobbed.

After a few seconds Lee returned the hug, filled with uncertainty. He tilted his head down toward hers and said, “Cassie, thanks for having faith in me.”

His face was mere inches from hers. Still wanting to push him away, she found herself tilting her head up toward his and moved her lips to his. So close she could breathe his fear, and she did. It fed her sense of rapture.

Cassie wanted to scream no! But their lips touched anyway. Neither one pushed it into a kiss, but Cassie felt the heat there, a bonfire in winter. Then Lee pulled back, a questioning look in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

She remained split between her disembodied self, feeling fear and worthlessness, and a deep-seated passion to merge her body with his. She tried to push him away but her arms wouldn’t comply.

Cassie heard her own voice, whispering, “Yes. Yes, Lee, I am.” Her own words shocked her. She was desperate to flee from him, and at the same time her hands responded, gripping his head with both hands and pulling his mouth toward hers.

She heard herself say, “I was worried I might have gotten you killed. You were never trained for ops and I thought I might be responsible for both our deaths.”

She couldn’t stop herself wanting him. She kissed him, fierce desire coming from a distant part of her she hadn’t felt since Evan. She was suddenly sure the voice in her head controlled her actions now. She fought it, but to no avail.

Once again, she felt disconnected from her body, watching from above as she drove her tongue into the deeper reaches of his mouth. Cassie drew blood from his lower lip. “And you might have died, just when I was beginning to like you.”

Lee grinned and returned the kiss. “You’re just one surprise after another.” He unknotted her bathrobe.

Cassie looked down and saw herself revealed, her tiny breasts bare for him. Her body and mind reunited in a single jolting second, and she was suddenly aware of what she was saying and doing.

She had no idea how the robe had fallen to the floor or how her arms became tangled around him. She noticed that she'd unbuttoned his shirt.

Lee admired his prize. "You're gorgeous."

Now aware, she sneered, "I'm not gorgeous. Don't lie to me. I'm as plain as a woman can be." She pulled away from him.

Lee placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her around. "Hey. You're mistaken. You've always been wrong about how you look to others. Especially to men. I know from how you look at yourself you think you're not pretty. But not true. I think you're just too arrogant to recognize others could be attracted to you. I'm happy to have you want me, and I want you at least as much. By the way, I love what you had done to your cheeks and your lips."

Cassie wore a puzzled expression on her face. Did she really want him? Her body said yes, definitely, now, right now. But her mind continued to will other outcomes. To confuse her more, the tone of their conversation was so placid. She found it deceiving her into feeling secure, as she had with Judy the night she'd had the awful nightmare. To keep from remembering the nightmare, she thought about the question posed by Lee claiming desire for her. Could she be more attractive than the ugly woman she'd always thought she was? In confusion, Cassie buried her head in his shoulder and cried.

He held her, caressed her chin, stroked her head.

Cassie made her decision. She kissed his lips again, acknowledging her true desire for him.

His clever lips touched hers again. His hand cupped her right breast, and she moaned with satisfaction. She found her legs struggling to stay vertical as she guided him to the bed. On the way, she pulled off his shirt and pushed him onto the bed so their heads were facing each other's torsos in opposite directions. She kissed his nipples. She asked, "Does that feel good?" and he nodded in approval. She sucked on his nipples while she unbuckled the belt of his pants, unbuttoned and unzipped, and pulled off his pants. The bulge in his shorts was unmistakable. "I guess you really are happy to see me."

Cassie pulled his shorts down and checked him out. He wasn't enormous, but she guessed he was big enough, erect, and here for her now. Lee reacted, uneasy as she inspected him. When she looked back to his face, satisfied, he tried to roll her under him, but she said, "No. A few nonnegotiable rules, Lee. I ride on top. Never on bottom. And you prime me before we start. Okay?"

Lee nodded. He reached his hand between her legs. She was downright wet. He forced her down and placed his head where his fingers had been seconds before. His sly tongue touched her in ways she hadn't let anyone else explore since Evan, and she felt the room flash colors while he moved his tongue almost to the point of being inside her. Cassie moaned. She could smell the musky odor of her fluids. Her heart raced and she felt something powerful flow from her head to her heart, a feeling so commanding it consumed her ability to feel anything else. She reached for his penis and began sucking on him, tasting salt and what she thought might have been sashimi, but no other flavors. His tongue drove her toward ecstasy. Her heart sang with a joy she'd not known since Evan. Mere seconds later, she climaxed.

He pulled her atop him, and she slowly and deliberately forced him to penetrate deep into her, hot as fire itself. She rode him, raised his head with one of her hands and tried to place one of her nipples into his mouth. He shook his head and instead she focused on her body, savored the sensations, convulsing into climax again, sending fluids streaming from her onto him, just as he ejaculated into her. She felt tears at the corners of her eyes. But these were from joy.

They remained coupled together as one. Cassie could feel his pulse pounding into her flesh where he melded with her. They breathed in tandem gasps.

She lowered her head onto his shoulder so he couldn't see her face. Alarm, fear coursed through her. She tried to hide her feelings but her body grew tense.

"You okay?" He ran his fingers through her hair, massaging her neck.

"Yeah." She didn't turn, afraid to face him. She wondered once again, could she trust him to do what she needed done? The voice inside her head screamed at her. Shit! What have you done? Now you'll be working with someone you hardly know, someone who knows every nuance of your

body. Every vulnerable spot. Worse still, you care about him. It was the stupidest thing you could have done.

She shifted and turned, caught sight of his face. Lee grinned like a teenage boy. She was almost sure she knew what he was thinking.

The damage was done. They'd fight together against their common foes. Lee was doomed to suffer the same fate. She might yet be responsible for both their deaths. The contingency plans she'd made when she fled Washington so long ago were now useless. She had no choice but to make sure they were successful.

\* \* \*

In the middle of the night Cassie heard the door's lock click open. She woke fast, sensing slight sounds of movement through the dark. She could smell the scent of cumin, cardamom, and cinnamon along with other spices reminiscent of the Middle East. Her eyes adjusted to the dark. A tall man stood near her. Evan. But he's dead! There is something wrong about him. The lower half of his body is dripping blood. There was a corpse that looked a little like him by his feet. His brother, Danny. To her left, Lee lay snoring, oblivious to everything.

Cassie rose to her elbows, watched Evan shake his head, chuckle. He said, "Cass, you're not responsible for my death. I didn't go to Iraq because of you. It was Danny's death that did it. And I've a message for you. Someone in our government stole your life, forced you to rip off your face and replace it with someone else's, someone you hate, and made you murder your unborn baby. They sold you to those who want to kill you. Someone in our government wants you dead. Trust that pesky voice in your head. It's not Misha's. You have nothing to do with him. That voice is your instincts telling you whether or not something is right."

He glided out through the door, disappearing into the hallway. Over his shoulder, he whispered, "Goodbye, Cass." She looked to where Danny had been but the body had vanished.

Before the door could close, figures entered the room and the aromas of Middle Eastern spices grew stronger. One of them turned on the light. Cassie gasped. It was Abdul Hassain, with the van driver and the three other Muslim extremists she'd murdered in Manhattan. They just stood there,



reaching under their coats for their guns. She looked around her in desperation for a weapon.

Lee was standing by the bed. He handed Cassie her chef's knife.

Her eyes snapped open. 4:13 a.m. on the hotel's alarm clock. Lee rolled over and snored. With sudden understanding, she padded off to the bathroom, thinking about her dream.

\* \* \*

The night had ended with a fog-blurred sunrise. Now they sat huddled together in hotel robes at the desk, working with their cell phones. A breakfast tray sat empty on the floor, crumbs from toast and small bits of egg and bacon on one of the plates.

Their room at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel was littered with soiled clothing, and scraps of paper from poorly-designed project plans. The bed emitted gamey aromas. They had not permitted the hotel staff to enter and clean the room.

The fear that had pushed them together had died. Now their task—saving their own lives—was the compulsion governing their behavior.

Lee reviewed Cassie's newest project plan draft. "Too tight on time to completion for every single task. No room for slippage. And the costs! How can you even begin estimating them before recruiting team leaders for the tasks?" He shook his head. "Oh, and I almost forgot...where's all the money going to come from? How are we ever gonna pay for this?"

At this last comment, Cassie nodded. "When I hacked the West Wing's program to fund Muslim extremists, I realized that the US Treasury Department sent them money, then had me steal the money back for reuse. Why can't I simply pick up the cash myself and use it to eliminate the Muslim extremists? This morning, before you woke, I wrote a program to identify their bank accounts and skim funds from them. It executes daily, subtracts about half a percent of the available balance, disguises the deductions as 'bank fees and penalties' and erases all traces of the hack. Collections this morning were about \$50,000 USD equivalent. The added benefit is that we now know where their local banks are. From the data I have, I may be able to figure out where each radical group is physically located."

Lee's face tensed in a way she recognized as thoughtful. "This is what you did for the agency, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes. At the rate I'm ripping them off, one hundred soldiers at about \$1,500 per day for four months is \$18,000,000, plus about \$2 million for weapons, totaling, say, about \$20 million needed in our Muslim extremist elimination fund. But at the rate I'm stealing the cash, it will take us four hundred days to accumulate the cash. Given the current plan, our project will run about one hundred days from start to finish, so if we survive I'll have to empty the extremists' bank accounts after we're done and pay our bills in arrears."

Her face bore a more serious expression. "After they're rendered, we take all the cash they have. We'd have lots of leftover money. Lee, we'll be rich if we live through this."

"And I don't pay if we're dead." She sat silent in thought a few seconds. "But your other criticisms of the plan are valid. For us to survive this, we have to act swiftly and take what would otherwise be unacceptable risks."

He thought for a second and nodded back. "Okay. Might work." Lee looked up from his cell phone. "I think I know why the mole sold you out. I reviewed all the message traffic that ran out of the Houmaz's locations in Upper Pachir, Afghanistan. Seems they think you know something no one was supposed to. They threatened to kill the mole and his family because of it."

"What? What could I know?"

"I don't know, Cassie, but whatever it is you know, it's what caused all this."

Cassie seethed, thinking she had worked three years at the agency and never suspected the depth of their capacity for deceit and treachery. "I guess whoever it is, he's in his element, the nation's capital, where he can be with so many others like him." She paused, trying to refocus. Then she looked into Lee's eyes and smiled. "Thanks, Lee. That explains a lot."

She watched his expression morph with satisfaction.

He said, "Oh, and before it gets lost in the shuffle of our plans, I picked up some fingerprints and DNA off the basement terminal, from the mole who blew your cover. Unless there's someone at the agency who can hack entry to the basement, it's either one of the Dires or Ass Dires. So

when we have the time, we'll need to find a way to get this stuff processed." He walked to the closet and pulled the paper pile from his suit jacket. And handed her the page with the Scotch tape pieces gently stuck to it.

"Dire" was the term used by underlings to refer to a director-level manager. "Ass Dire" was the title used in private to refer to the assistant directors. Lee said, "I got there just after whoever it was left." He used his cell's infrared connection to send over several more files. "Here's your proof: his login was active when I copied the keystrokes for his sign-off. We have his user identification and password, but they're not any I had on record with permissions to enter the basement. So I'm sure they're hacked. Even if I can get you through the firewall, there's probably nothing there. But the destination end point of the message appears to be somewhere in the foothill caves near Nangarhar. A long drive from the airport in Jalalabad, Afghanistan."

Cassie muttered, "Afghanistan? Shit. This means we'll need two separate black ops teams, not just the one I've been planning for Riyadh. The expense and coordination required by the timing of two simultaneous ops complicates things a lot. We'll have to keep Pesi in Riyadh and Tariq in Nangarhar from knowing about the takedown of whichever one we do first."

Lee nodded. "We'll have to close down communications. Black out one of the countries. Right?"

"When I was in Riyadh, I reviewed their electrical systems. The country has a bulletproof system. We'll have to black out the area of the caves in Afghanistan. How the fuck we gonna do that?" She felt beaten

Lee shrugged. "Not impossible. I'll may have a solution for that. GNU radio. If we can develop that tech so it works when other telecommunications are down, we'd have a chance to surprise them in both locations."

"What's GNU radio?"

Lee read the screen of his cell and then faced Cassie. "When I told you I'd found a solution for the cell phone problem, I was dead serious. I found something better than using an encrypted satellite phone for secure communications. This fix for cell phones is something new from a Silicon Valley engineering genius named Eric Blossom. I found someone who

worked with him, developing something called the GNU radio Phone.”

“What do you suggest we do to get this done?”

He examined what he’d written in the notes file. “For a fee to be negotiated between you and Adam Mahee, he’ll contact Eric and get detailed specifications. He’ll build a version functioning on cell phones or smartphones.”

Her face formed the question with a frown. “And how would that help us?”

“It works like an untraceable version of a satellite phone, but in a more compact package. Your friendly Muslim extremists can’t trace this right now. Adam told me if we can design this, coding and testing should take under one month.”

“Does this work like the Warfighter Information Network-Tactical the army used in Afghanistan?”

“Similar. But what we’re paying for is the encryption module that Mahee claims works better than anything DARPA will have for the next five years. It uses extra-large variable-length key sizes and unique voice encoding techniques. WIN-T is good, and Mahee’s design is based on it. But his is better. I met him at a computer security conference and he showed me a beta model.”

“Tell me the rest.”

“He’ll build it out of commodity parts, highly available for cordless phones, and it’ll be cheap for voice communications. The beachball antenna could be so tiny it can fit within the antenna from the PDA. The radio runs in the 900 megahertz, 2.4 gigahertz, or 5.8 gigahertz bands, even when using large amounts of power. So it’s portable and robust. And he can cobble something together with more power than the FCC allows, with ruggedness built in for battlefield use. Here’s Adam’s number.”

He sent her a text message. “Okay. I did what I said I would. Stop being so grouchy.”

She shook her head. “No. And you haven’t. What about the personnel lists you were supposed to have?”

He nodded. “It’s done. Here. The contact info for the hackers and black ops personnel you requested. Except I had to flee before I completed vetting their records. So I’ve hundreds of them and for all I know, many of the retired ones may be dead.” He tapped a few buttons on his cell.

“They’re in your phone now.”

She nodded.

He transmitted several more files. “As for the last file, it’s a collection of arms dealers the agency uses for black ops when we want materiel that can’t be traced to us. But I don’t believe they’ll be able to get us ammo traceable back to the agency. Unfortunately, I left too soon to be able to source the ammo within the agency. Sorry.” Lee shrugged.

Cassie sighed. “Lee, I apologize. You did great.”

He suddenly bolted upright. “Damn! I just thought of a solution to the timeline problem. Let’s just hire a mercenary army, one complete army, instead of raising one. It would cut at least two months off the time to completion on the plan. Not to mention reducing the costs. We could train them and be ready in less than a month.”

Cassie sat ramrod straight, her eyes blinking. “Of course. What a great idea, Lee! But how do we find a private army for hire?”

He stared at the cell phone and punched a few keys on the thumb board. “There’s Xe. Used to call themselves Blackwater. I could contact them easily.” He pointed to the tiny screen: <http://www.blackwaterusa.com>. “But they’ve made the television world news so if we used them word would probably leak.”

He entered another web address. “Here. Look.”

The site at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/mercenary.htm> showed a list of them. There were over sixty mercenary companies. He clicked on one of the links. “Two of them look especially promising: [beni-tal.co.il/](http://beni-tal.co.il/) and [www.krav-gruppe.com](http://www.krav-gruppe.com), both from Israel. I’ll send out requests for proposals to a few. We can choose one that’s small enough to serve our needs and not attract attention to our plan.”

Cassie considered this. “Good. Send the RFPs.”

He couldn’t conceal his fear about what he was becoming party to. “So, if we do this, what’s the first thing we have to do now?”

She said, “Get out of Dodge. This hotel is nice, but every time we leave the room we’re visible on their videocams and sooner or later, bad things will happen if we stay. We’ll need to disguise ourselves to lower the probability someone will notice us.”

She paced the room. “I think we should move somewhere far away and very rural. Then I’ll need two or three hackers to begin coding and testing

the GNU radio cell phone software while you hire a merc army and direct black ops training.”

She knew Lee had never planned a black operation.

But neither had she.

Before she could speak, he did, asking the question most troubling to her. “Yes, a location with very low population density. No prying eyes. So, go where?”

Cassie sat in silence for seconds. She scanned the paintings in their room as if they might provide something coded into one of them. One was an arid scene. “We need someplace replicating a section of Middle Eastern desert so our black ops mercs can train there. I think Nevada or the California desert might work best. Mountainous terrain and far away from any towns.”

At this, Lee frowned. “How about the Santa Lucia Mountains ten miles east of the ocean, in the Fort Hunter Liggett area. The Ventana Wilderness, near Camp Roberts. Altitudes up over five thousand feet. Our military trains troops bound for Afghanistan there. It’s vast. We can easily remain hidden.” He smiled, happy, like a puppy.

Her expression widened in evident surprise. “Lee, how do you know about this place?”

“I was brought up near Santa Barbara. When I was a teen, Mom and Dad took me on camping trips near the Nacimiento-Fergusson Road in the mountains southeast of Lucia Point at Big Sur.”

She realized that until now, they’d never spoken to each other about their lives from before they’d met. She thought about her own teenage years, at Half Moon Bay High School, and her family’s trips to Big Sur. She remembered majestic mountains crashing into narrow fringe beaches at the Pacific Ocean. It was a gorgeous place, her favorite place on earth. Excited she and Lee had grown up so nearby each other, she was also surprised neither of them had known this.

“Just happens. I grew up on the San Mateo coastside, and I know the place you’re talking about very well. I’ve spent entire days in the area but never camped there. Mom insisted we stay at a hotel. We usually stayed at Lucia Lodge. The rooms had a queen bed for my parents and they brought a sleeping bag for me. There wasn’t any television or radio, but I went on hikes around the area with my mom and dad.”

She thought for just a second, thinking about whether they could find the privacy they'd need there to train her mercenaries. "It's always quiet there and except for Highway One, few cars come by down the road. There's a road leading from Highway One up into the mountains. Very remote." Lee's suggestions, once again, were spot on. "Yes, let's do it there."

He nodded, pacing the room. "Okay. Another thing settled. Let's get out of here as fast as possible."

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## CHAPTER 24

*August 19, 4:21 p.m.  
Room 312, Mandarin Oriental,  
1330 Maryland Avenue SW,  
Washington, DC*

Cassie dug into her attaché case, pulling out articles of clothing, including a well-stained and ripped raincoat, a black ski cap, and other discards. Her first disguise. She tossed these to Lee, along with items she'd bought yesterday. "When we're done, no one will recognize you. To start, strip off all your clothing and go to the bathroom."

Lee did as asked.

She filled the bathtub and dropped three bottles of brown shoe polish into it. "Step into the tub, please. First, I'm going to change the color of your skin. Lie down, take a deep breath and use your fingertips to cover the openings of your nose. Let yourself sink totally under the bath water for as long as you can."

He held fingertips to his nostrils and splashed under, staying submerged for thirty seconds.

The smells of hair dyes, shoe polish, and unwashed old clothing mixed with the stale odors already in their room. She remembered how she'd felt the last time she'd done this and relished leaving as soon as they could.

She worked on his appearance for almost an hour, putting him through many of the same changes she had undergone when she'd fled DC so many months ago. Her work made Lee look wild. He'd stand out in a crowd, something no one in an undercover operation would ordinarily want, but he wouldn't look in the least like Lee Ainsley, and that might be enough.

"Okay, Lee, put these clothes on." While he dressed, she became an old and cheap call girl, with thick makeup and bright red lipstick. "We carry



everything in our attaché cases, and we put them into brown paper shopping bags. We top the bags off with food and water bottles from the room's bar, leave without paying the bill via the service entrance, and hoof it to the bus terminal." She checked her makeup to make sure it looked disgusting.

"You will be my pimp, but don't worry. Snoop cameras aren't programmed to pick up anyone that looks like this and that's what we have to worry about. As for any johns I might attract, they'll run away when they imagine my personal hygiene from seeing this disguise. I look frightful." She grinned into the mirror. Then she gazed at Lee and burst out laughing.

It took three hours to walk to the bus station. On the way there she bought some needed items at a costume store. Her fear was so strong her palms slicked with perspiration. Lee seemed oblivious to their danger. Once he got "into role," Cassie had to keep reminding him not to attract attention to them. They purchased two bus tickets using counterfeit cash.

It wasn't until the bus crossed out of Washington's city limits she relaxed and no longer heard the blood rushing through the arteries in her skull. She watched Lee startle every time the bus slowed, but the voice in her head remained silent.

Their first leg of the journey took them to Dubuque, Iowa. They exited the bus and entered the station's restrooms where each donned upscale casual outfits before they made their overnight arrangements. They spent their first night at the Lighthouse Valley Bed and Breakfast.

On each part of their trip, for their safety's sake, they sat as far away from everyone else as they could. The next day she became a bounty hunter and he was a bail jumper in handcuffs, then on to Austin, Texas, where they stayed at The Brook House.

While there, she dragged Lee to Antone's on Fifth to hear Marcia Ball play blues piano and sing. They stood in the back near the bar and drank beer. Lee asked Cassie to dance, and she was clumsy. Ball sang swamp boogie blues, and Cassie hummed these tunes as they walked back to the Brook House.

Two stops and two costume changes later, they finally arrived at the Greyhound bus station in San Jose.

\* \* \*

When they paid for their taxicab and checked into the Doubletree Hotel close to the San Jose Airport, they appeared as two Silicon Valley technogeeks at a business conference.

The clerk at the registration desk, a young properly-coiffed woman in her early thirties, tried not to look at them as she asked, “Two adjacent rooms?”

Lee smiled. “Ah, yes.”

The clerk grinned back discreetly. She recorded their names from two credit cards Cassie had manufactured with other people’s identities.

They both moved into one of the rooms and unpacked their clothes. Without stopping for any communication between them, each sat in chairs around the hotel room’s desk in the common area and used wireless access to send recruitment emails, receive responses, and follow-up questions from possible team members.

To Cassie’s great surprise and satisfaction, two days later she found several FedEx envelopes slipped under their door containing signed non-disclosure agreements—NDAs—from several potential hacker recruits.

She hummed “Sunday Street,” a Dave Van Ronk blues tune, while she stood in line to rent a car under the false identity she’d used to register at the hotel. Cassie drove the neighborhood until she’d rented a Post Office box for subsequent mail from potential recruits. She felt blissful. Their plans were coming together.

Within a week she had NDAs from six skilled hackers begging for a chance to work this project, which she code-named “Project Kahuna.”

Each hacker thought they worked for a startup company that hadn’t been named or funded yet, and “Kahuna” was the precursor name to a commercial software product. She sent each hacker \$6,000 via a Fedwire funds transfer into their checking account as a signing bonus. She told them, since the startup hadn’t rented office space yet, they would all have to work at home.

She planted news items on Internet blogs and in some of the alt.binaries newsgroups about the nonexistent company. She tagged and coded the news items so they became big news on Internet websites specializing in startup companies. The resulting “buzz” made it easier for her to attract the talent she needed.

One person, who sent an email to the nonexistent company claimed the

call-sign “CryptoMonger,” and he seemed to know more about the type of work she did as a hacker than he did about programming. Cassie stared at his name. She thought she’d heard of W. Wing before, but she was too tired to remember details. Cassie filed his contact email address away, just in case she ever needed another person with her skill set, but she didn’t hire him for the project.

Cassie bought all the hardware she thought they’d need from Fry’s Electronics. Using an Epson printer, she created identities for two cofounders, Lee and herself. These included identity badges and business cards, just in case they needed to meet any of the hackers.

She crafted specifications for each piece of code they would create and test. All the modules were designed to fit together so each piece could be coded by a single hacker with none of the others knowing enough to guess the real purpose of the final product. This took her almost a week.

They changed hotels every three days, and in under a week she had the GNU radio phone specifications ready for the hackers. Three weeks later, she had received the last of the tested modules and combined them all into a “system.”

But the GNU radio software didn’t work.

Cassie cursed in Pashto, Dari, Farsi, Arabic, Lebanese, Turkish, and Hebrew as she sat in one of the rooms of the Mark Hopkins Hotel on California Street in San Francisco.

Lee cast a questioning look. She explained, “The code is way too big to fit into the onboard memory of any cell phone. And I don’t think it can correctly send and receive through a satellite phone because the connection needs either a hardware translator or a plain hard-wired connection.”

Lee looked puzzled. “Cassie, your skills don’t include electronic engineering, do they?”

She shook her head. “No, regrettably. Economics, not engineering. Damn. I’ve searched the lists of agency talent you had brought with you for help. There isn’t anyone.”

She felt desperation. “What can we do now? Lee, do you know anyone who designs and builds microprocessor chip sets for the agency?”

Lee’s face was blank. “Uh, no. Never had ‘need to know.’ I don’t even know who at the agency would act as control for this type of project.”

He looked back at her. “Is there any other way?”

“Don’t think so. We need a communications technology that will work during a blackout, so we can coordinate between the two attacks at Riyadh and Afghanistan. We absolutely require some way to secure our mercenary communications.”

“How big is the system?”

She frowned. “There’s over seventy gig of software in our little GNU radio application. It’s so big we need it stored in one of the newer microSD cards. But the card will also need to be able to communicate with satphones, as if the cell phones were satphones themselves. There is no off-the-floor hardware product available that can perform both functions. I could edit and optimize the code for several months before I have any hope of shortening it enough to make it fit. Might as well code the entire system into a card modified to provide hard-wired communications.”

Lee sat still as he moved one hand in circles. As if he was writing in the air. After several seconds, he faced her. “I think you’re too close to the situation, Ma Petite Général. What company was your first Swiftshadow Consulting client?”

She was jolted back to him from wherever her mind had wandered. “Huh? Oh, yes, of course! Stillwater! They produce chipset technology. Damn, I forgot. They’d be perfect. I’ll write an RFP document and send it out as email. Thanks, Lee.”

She reviewed her mental checklist. Now they had the material they could use to identify the mole. She knew who the mole had sold her identity to: the Houmaz brothers. She knew why the mole had outed her: something the Houmaz brothers thought she knew. Lee and she wouldn’t need to form an army, they could just hire one. Their mercs would need to perform two simultaneous operations, one in Riyadh and one in Afghanistan.

Only two things remained on her checklist:

Crafting a secure communications method they could use after disabling Afghanistan’s electric grid. A blackout in communications while they took down the brothers. The GNU radio.

And finding out who the mole was.

She gave him a grateful kiss, and it turned into more than just the meeting of their lips. It had been days since they’d touched each other. Lee was ready before she finished kissing him, and her desire for him grew as she felt him stiffen.

Another sultry kiss. Cassie felt his hand touch her robe, slip inside, and grope her breast, squeeze a nipple. When his other hand reached between her legs to stroke her, her legs grew unsteady. She exploded in ecstasy, wetting her seat through her open robe. Cassie moaned and felt too weak to move or speak, and motioned toward the bed with her eyes. Lee moved with her in tandem.

She fitted herself atop him, drawing him inside her, her legs bent and her hands squeezing his nipples while he lay flat on the bed. Lee raised his head and sucked on one of her breasts. Surprised, Cassie moaned again and climaxed.

\* \* \*

The next morning, she started on the RFP, working nonstop. Most RFPs were longish documents with endless details, but hers was more of a query letter. Just the scant details necessary to provoke a response. Shortly after noon she released this email to Stillwater:

My company, an unfunded startup named Kahuna Software, is ready to contract with a chip manufacturer to design and manufacture a small lot (quantity 300) of beta-level 64-gigabyte microSD cards with hard-coded proprietary telecommunications programs and a proprietary wireless telecommunications interface built into the chip set.

We must be sole providers and owners of all patents applied for in developing the resulting technology, both hardware and software, but if the beta-level chips lead to development of a commercial product, we would consider the company capable of producing the beta-level chips as a nonexclusive licensee.

We have developed the functional and systems specifications for this product and they will be made available to you after you sign and return the attached NDA (non-disclosure agreement, in Microsoft Word format). Use those specifications to prepare your proposal.

Please reply before Friday with a letter of intent and a signed NDA to the address on this email's letterhead should you wish us to consider you for the project, and prepare a detailed proposal by the following Tuesday, if you wish to be considered.

She knew she had an alternative provider: the company which stole Stillwater's technology. But it left her with a bad taste to deal with thieves—like her.

She looked at her watch. Wednesday. I'd better get used to waiting.

She drifted without focus. Too anxious. She watched Lee rub his bleary eyes as he sent out email. She walked to the chair where he sat. "Come on, tiger, time for sleepy-bye." Lee looked up from his keyboard in anticipation. "No, not sex. Sleep. We need rest more than sex right now." She held her arms open to him.

They moved to the bed, one slow step at a time, a day closer to either death or safety.

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## CHAPTER 25

*August 19, 4:21 p.m.  
Houmaz family estate,  
east outskirts of Riyadh,  
Saudi Arabia*

Pesi Houmaz lay in the Sleep Number bed he'd shipped to Riyadh from Cleveland and thought about his failures. Twice he'd promised his brother Tariq he would find and torture the Sashakovich woman, and twice he'd failed. She'd executed the first team he sent. Tariq needed to know what she knew of their pending operation and if she'd told anyone else about it.

He rolled over on the mattress, feeling the stress of his failures in the pains shooting through his back. He cursed his brother, always wanting and expecting him to perform. He thought aloud, "I'm just a man, Tariq. If Allah has a hand in what men do, then isn't his will as much a factor as my own efforts?" But there was no answer, and his backache wasn't helping. He lay there, eyes closed, thinking how to impress his older brother.

But Pesi wanted her dead as vengeance for the agency's theft of over \$50 million from his brother and him. He knew if he failed to find her, or even worse, if he found her only to have her slip away again, he'd lose more face with Tariq than he could afford. He rose from the bed and went to the kitchen to make a cup of honey mint tea.

As he sipped from the cup, thoughts raced through him—memories of better times, when, years ago, Tariq had studied engineering and his father had looked to the older brother as his successor in the family's oil business. Days when Pesi was just the younger brother, attending high school in Riyadh, preparing to enter the University of London. But the "accident" on the drilling platform changed all that.

He placed the half-filled cup on the nightstand and turned out the light.

Would sleep end his waking nightmares?

He tossed for an hour and turned the light on, grabbing the pad of paper and pen he kept at the nightstand. Pesi Houmaz crafted another plan to locate her. He wrote a complete plan, then read it and crumbled the paper into a ball. He tried again. And again. At 2 a.m. he gave up, almost as irritated with himself as he thought his brother was.

He closed his eyes again, to a sleep that would not come, and thought about their pending operation. He smiled. At least this plan was about to yield fruit—that is, if Sashakovich didn't know and hadn't reported it to Homeland Security before she was ousted. He needed something to show his brother. Some way to prove his worth.

Just after sunrise, he staggered into the conference room of their Riyadh compound, yawning wildly. Sultan Raman, one of their brightest and strongest soldiers, waited for him, sitting in one of the conference room side chairs that surrounded the elegant carved table. Raman's brother, Agha Hassan Raman, was the only other survivor of the family. Their parents and sister had been killed by Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. Agha Hassan now trained as a suicide bomber at their camp in Afghanistan.

Sultan rose from the chair and bowed his head slightly as Pesi entered. Houmaz merely nodded dismissively. They both sat. "Good morning, Sultan. Are you ready?"

Raman smiled, revealing several missing teeth. He nodded his head. "The men are impatient. All our supplies for the trip are packed, and we have all the materials you wish shipped." He held out the list and Houmaz examined it for completeness:

<u>Weapon</u>	<u>Piece</u>	<u>Truck</u>	<u>Route</u>
1	1.1 – Timer	1	Canada, Toronto, 401E to 81S, then 95 to DC
1	1.2 – Detonator	2	Canada, Toronto, US-219 south out of Buffalo, PA-153 to I-80 east, PA-970 to US-322 to US-220/I-99 to I-70 to I-270
1	1.3 – Foil Globe	3	Mexico, Nogales, 19N to Tucson, 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC1
1	1.4 – Bullet Tube	4	Canada, Toronto, Cross border at Lewiston, NY, SR 20/63 to IS 390/US 15 south, becomes I86/US15, to US 15/Susquehanna Trail, 15 becomes IS 83, to 695, 95S

Houmaz could visualize these parts assembled into their casings, along



with the tampers, plastic foam fillers, and other pieces. He imagined all the trucks arriving at the safe house, each driven by its own team. Then, the technicians could assemble the parts into three complete weapons. He pointed at Sultan. “You have no problem handling four trucks, even though they’ll each be leaving at least four hours apart?”

Raman held up his cell phone. “I have enough of these, each is for one use only, and then I will destroy it. Each of the drivers has as many as he’ll need, and each one they hold corresponds with one of mine. So the drivers have four each and I have seventeen.”

“And the seventeenth?” Houmaz tested Raman’s recollection.

“It is to inform you when we have all the parts at the safe house in New Jersey, ready for assembly and transshipment to West Virginia, where the explosives will be fitted within the bombs.”

“Yes.” Houmaz shook Raman’s hand and said, “Then leave now. The ship will meet you tomorrow evening in Oman to take you through the Suez. May Allah guide you.”

## CHAPTER 26

*August 19, 6:34 p.m.  
Fort Hunter Liggett,  
near Camp Roberts,  
Big Sur, California*

Major Avram Shimmel marched into his campaign tent, late for the meeting with his client. Shimmel was the owner of the mercenary army Lee contracted for their black ops. Lee had been there, waited for him, and now was gone. He'd left a note. Shimmel read it and cursed in Hebrew.

Lee wanted Shimmel to explain how the functional teams would work when reformed into battle squadrons. Avram suspected Lee was not faring well in this stressful situation. It must be unfamiliar territory for the former Army lieutenant. Shimmel would need to find a way to keep Ainsley's emotions from turning this into an unmanageable situation.

Shimmel had eight years as an officer in the Israeli army. He was a veteran of the skirmishes in Lebanon as a tank commander, and had been recruited as a Mossad operative.

He smoothed out the jacket of his uniform and sat. He picked up the small picture frame holding a photo of his wife and daughters from the campaign table in his tent.

He wiped the tears from his eyes as he thought about the day he lost his wife and daughter to a car bomb. Since his tragedy, he'd worked as a merc and saved the bulk of his income to fund his dream: a mercenary strike force to use against Muslim extremists.

He prayed he would soon have the opportunity to kill those responsible for his grief. He hated the Houmaz brothers. Shimmel wanted to savor the bittersweet taste of their deaths.

He'd found Ainsley to be adequate as a project manager but uninspired

as a tactician and clueless as a strategist. It hadn't mattered yet, since Ainsley wasn't arrogant and took Shimmel's suggestions every time, as he came to understand them.

Leftovers from his coursework during his career with the Israeli Army were neatly stacked in a corner of his tent, including the works of Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Musashi Miyamoto, and John Boyd, as well as the doctrine on counterinsurgency by US Army Lieutenant Colonel Conrad Crane. He lifted a football playbook from the New England Patriots from the stack of books. It was autographed by their quarterback and he examined a page he'd dog-eared. This he removed and compared to a similar page in a loose leaf labeled "Military Playbook."

The Military Playbook was separated into four sections; Mission, Strategy, Tactics, and Operations. He placed the football playbook page into the loose-leaf Operations section.

The page he examined included combinations for main, flanking, artillery, and aerial support to produce myriad permutations of battle force. These could be custom tailored on the fly to any situation.

Shimmel scribbled notes on the margin of the page. "With this alteration, yeah, it will work now."

He thought for a second. Would there be any benefit in lessons from basketball or hockey? He made a mental note to research this.

He was considered a legend in the Israeli Defense Force. His "American football playbook" approach to warfare had been taught to senior level officers at IDF since his retirement two years ago.

None of his four functional teams—communications, explosives, assault, and stealth—were consolidated into combat teams yet. The functional team leaders were finally comfortable with their own functions, and had proven their skills to their team members. What Shimmel now planned would be their big test.

Tonight he would tear apart each of these teams and reconfigure each into eight black ops combat teams. He intended to group them into one combat team with thirty members for the assault into the Houmaz compound in Riyadh, and seven others with ten members each for the seven caves they'd identified in the Afghanistan mountains. Each of the teams would contain members of the previous discipline-oriented functional teams.

Shimmel hoped he truly understood his client, Lee Ainsley. Avram had been through this many times: Ainsley worried about variables he couldn't understand, imagine, or control.

Lee had interviewed Shimmel while deciding if Avram's mercenary army would be the best fit to their project. But Shimmel had used the interview as an opportunity to gain intimate knowledge of his client. He'd learned that Lee had studied tactics at West Point. Ainsley had read many of the same textbooks Shimmel used to teach war. When he'd graduated as a lieutenant, Lee served just two years before being "moved" into the agency. Before now, Lee never had responsibility for military tactics, strategy, or even operations. As a soldier six years ago, Ainsley had been assigned to a security detail out of Fort Meade, before the agency trained him for computer network security.

Avram knew Lee wasn't ready to manage this operation.

But Avram also knew Lee felt that not being ready wasn't an acceptable excuse for failure and—for Ainsley—failure meant death.

He remembered the questions Ainsley asked him during the interview: "Isn't this crazy? How can we defeat these people when the entire United States government can't?"

And Avram remembered his own response: "No, not crazy. With enough will of purpose, properly trained and equipped troops can succeed in a planned surgical strike. I would never agree to lead my men into a losing battle. We will succeed."

Shimmel reread Ainsley's printed message and realized from its tone they'd be training for just two more weeks at the outside. Was that enough time?

At least he was almost finished babysitting his client.

The assignment had been set up for him by Yigdal Ben-Levy, who until last year had been Associate Director of the Mossad. Ben-Levy had followed Sashakovich's adventures since her "problem" in Riyadh. The Mossad wanted the Houmaz brothers sent to "a better place"—their graves. They'd funded the creation of Shimmel's mercenary strike force, Kravgruppe, although no one at the Mossad realized it except Ben-Levy.

Shimmel decided to call a meeting of all one hundred members of his battle team, to understand what they thought, felt, and believed they were capable of. He picked up the satphone and dialed a number. "McTavish,

please get LeFleur and Giordella and tell them to bring their entire crews to my tent at nineteen hundred sharp. I have a few additional “plays” we must try, to ensure we’re battle-ready.”

\* \* \*

Cassie walked around the room, cursing up a storm. Stillwater offered to build the software for free, but wanted “Kahuna” to give them exclusive rights to the technology.

Cassie countered the offer, suggesting a nonexclusive license and a 25 percent commission. She thought her offer fair, but Stillwater had returned another aggressive counter.

She thought of her negotiation with Norm Cisco from the Fed, so long ago. Whoever held the most powerful cards controlled the negotiation. Her best cards were that time is of the essence and Stillwater wasn’t the only chip maker in town. She keyed a reply and sent it to them in email:

We have run out of time. Either you accept the last offer we made or we’ll go with one of your competitors with whom we’re also negotiating. Reply required no later than 4:30 p.m. today.

The competitor she referred to was the company she had broken into in Hong Kong. She didn’t want to offer them the job. But if Stillwater didn’t agree to her terms, she’d start a new negotiation with them.

She pressed the Send key with a grin of bitter determination, and checked her website for a response every five minutes. Less than fifteen minutes passed before they sent their begrudging acceptance.

“Finally!”

\* \* \*

Tariq sat stewing in the shade of the mountain cliffs outside the tunnel entrance. He picked up the call to his satellite phone on the third ring. In eastern Afghanistan, normal cell phone service was nonexistent. It was burning hot, and though it was dry, perspiration dripped down his neck. He’d been working eighteen hours a day or more. It had been three weeks since his last bath, but he was used to the overpowering stench of his body.

Tariq could hear Pesi's fear-tinged words, and wondered how bad his younger brother had screwed it up this time.

"Tariq, uh, I'm in a small Lebanese restaurant in downtown Riyadh, uh, reporting status, both good and bad." He heard Pesi's rush to get the words out. "We haven't found either Sashakovich or Ainsley. Both disappeared on the same day. They have not used cell phones since."

He stifled a curse thinking of Pesi's failure to apprehend Sashakovich. "You've been trying to find her for months. We're out of time. We must know what she knows before we mount our plan. Send an urgent immediate message to our mole at the agency. Threaten the mole. Use the mole's family as leverage. Unless the mole can deliver Sashakovich to us within two weeks, we'll do to the entire family what we were going to do to the bitch."

Tariq thought for a second. His brother had mentioned good news. "What is the other news? You have 'good' news?"

"Our other project is proceeding on schedule. Sultan Raman left last night with eight mujahidin. Their truck is on a ship nearing the Suez at this moment. In two weeks the ship will reach Toronto. So even if we don't find her until then, our plan can still work. Each of the three other trucks is either now in transit or will be by tomorrow evening. The pieces shipped by airplane are being packed today for the three commercial aircraft to take them to destinations within the United States. And those parts to be taken into the United States by their own military aircraft are now in our inventory. These will go out last to the safe house in Trenton, in about a week."

Tariq thought, *finally, my brother did something right.*

But they couldn't proceed until they knew what she knew. Tariq pictured her body, slowly bleeding out and mounted against the bed frame, the broom handle lodged deep within her. The thought sent a thrill through him. He rewarded Pesi with the barest of praise: "Salaam, brother. Track these shipments closely."

\* \* \*

The mole sat in the basement at one of the secure terminals in the headquarters building of Gilbert Greenfield's unnamed intelligence agency

on K Street, reading the email for the third time. The mole shuddered. How could this happen? *Once again the Houmaz hoodlums are threatening my entire family.* The mole had done “off the wire” projects. Operations without agency knowledge. And now there were no good choices left. Where was Ainsley or Sashakovich? The mole couldn’t reassign agency resources to locate them since they were probably within the borders of the United States. If the mole was caught, a prison sentence was likely even before the Houmaz bunch came to murder the mole’s family.

The bureaucrat the mole reported to was starting to wonder what the mole was up to. To keep from giving more clues, the mole would have to go outside the agency for this project’s staff, and any help would have to be paid in cash. Another “off the wire” project. And if anyone sniffed this out, the mole would be toast.

Who at the agency was poor enough yet bright enough to coordinate the project? The mole would need to take out a second mortgage to pay for this.

The mole’s head fell in despair, torn between being forced to act with reckless speed without a plan, and the need to focus, to create the plan.

# PART III

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## CHAPTER 27

*August 20, 9:23 a.m.  
Fort Hunter Liggett,  
near Camp Roberts,  
Big Sur, California*

Adam Mahee pushed up his thick glasses. He held a cell phone containing a microSD card attached to a small beachball antenna. Only five-foot-six, Mahee had been a corporal during Viet Nam. And like many of the other African Americans he'd served with, being smart had helped him survive in an army that—years ago—hadn't offered blacks equal opportunity. "Uh, it seems to work, though I haven't tested it except very briefly this morning. So far, it doesn't cause the cell phone to crash and it transmits across the room quite well." He handed it to Cassie.

She looked at the unit. "Adam, does this work if they actively try jamming?"

His eyes focused on some distant spot inside him. "Theoretically, you can't jam this GNU radio the way it's installed."

"What do you mean by 'theoretically'? Our lives will depend on this. If it doesn't work, we'll never be able to complete the first operation and still be able to surprise them at the second op. So tell me, why are you sure this will work?"

His eyes seemed to become unfocused as he stared at the unit he held in his hands. He spoke swiftly. "What Stillwater did was build an enhanced USRP with analog-to-digital and digital-to-analog, up-and-down converters, coupled to a low-noise filter within a modified Xilinx Vertex Floating Point Gate Array. It's a smart design. They connect on one side to a sixty-four-gigabyte microSD card hooking into the cell phone and on the other side to an embedded micro-beachball antenna. The custom-built card

has enough memory to hold all the programs and communications functions.”

“It has a what?”

Seeing Cassie’s confusion, Mahee smiled. “I’ve never seen anything this well designed. It’ll work reliably in open sky.”

He placed the unit on the coffee table and waved his hands to punctuate his words. “In reality, of course it is still possible to jam us, and the agency knows how and has the equipment to do it. But your garden-variety Muslim extremists just don’t know how as yet. Of course, there are other factors that could render this setup ineffective. The canyon landscape might wreak havoc with communications, for example.”

He pointed to the larger unit. “And it won’t work at all inside the cave tunnels. There the mercs will need to drop landlines behind them like bread crumbs. Remember what we wanted this for was an untraceable version of a satellite phone to connect Riyadh and Afghanistan. For the specific assignment you have, it’s not just a good choice. It’s the only choice.”

She thought for a few seconds. “Uh, right. Well, you need to test this setup. As we find situations where it fails, I’ll ask you to find and fix the problems. As we agreed, your payment will be ownership of all the patents and copyrights with the only outstanding agreement being Stillwater’s nonexclusive resale license, and even there you’ll receive commissions.”

“Okay.” His eyes bulged, excited. “You don’t have to sell me. I’ll be dressed for the desert in ten minutes. Get me ten field grunts with GNU radio-equipped cell phones, satphones, and one micro-beachball server antenna, and I’ll get started.”

\* \* \*

The mole thought that Bob Gault looked like the kind of middle-aged man who sold used cars: pear-shaped body, greasy hair, with a sleazy-looking leer. No wonder the man was a confirmed bachelor, married once for less than a year. Women must run in the opposite direction as fast as they could. But the man had his uses. No one who spent any time with him ever suspected he was a covert ops manager.

The mole reviewed the man’s dossier to ensure that the best person for the assignment had been selected. The file stated Gault was in his late

forties and had run hundreds of ops, always posing as the “coach,” working from the outside in. Bob never had to earn anyone’s trust but still managed to get people to give him what he wanted. The mole’s last review included a comment that manipulating people was his single prime skill in operations. Gault always posed as the friend with worldly experience.

The mole met with him for less than three minutes, telling him, “This operation will be ‘off the wire.’ I need to know the location of one former NOC operative and one missing director at the agency. If I get the intelligence I require, Bob, I’ll have you short-listed for promotion.”

\* \* \*

As the mole described the assignment, Gault realized he had no option but to take it. The mole had made sure sure Gault knew that this was a private contract. If he declined the assignment it would ensure a bad and early end to his career. “This isn’t going to be easy,” Gault said.

The mole handed him a folder. “That may be, but it’s still the job. Here’s the intel. Read it and leave it. The two targets could be anywhere. They may be traveling together or separately. There isn’t any evidence they’ve had any more than a casual passing knowledge of one another. Sashakovich seems to have morphed into a master of disguise. Since her dismissal from the agency, she’s also become a model hacker. That development isn’t really a surprise. We know she’s bright. If the two are traveling together, they’ll be especially hard to track.”

Gault knew this was true. It would be harder to find them than finding a stealth bomber using World War Two radar. But if this was so important, how come funding was so tight? And why so clandestine?

Gault shrugged to himself. He needed to create a plan for the assignment as soon as possible. As he left the mole’s office he wondered how he could succeed.

The mole had given him only three days to complete the task. Gault shook his head. It would be tough. He took the elevator up to the agency library. He loved this room’s wood paneling, so soothing, and the maps of every trouble spot, glowing within large LCD screens.

He stopped at the snack dispenser and fed it money, taking candy bars, potato chips, and breath mints, stashing them into the pockets of his suit

jacket. He bought a cup of imitation latte as well, and made it to a library cubicle without spilling the hot liquid. His favorite cubicle was secluded within the northwest corner of the building. But it was occupied. He searched for one far away from those that contained other agency employees. This one was “need to know.”

Gault found a quiet, private space. He sat down, spread the consumables across the desk and thought about this assignment he’d code-named “Shit Bag.” He took a sip of his latte and scratched his head. Where were they? How could he even determine that? Was anyone helping them that could lead him to them?

He left the cubicle and walked to one of the large mounted wall maps, this one depicting the world. He traced his finger along several areas, including the Middle East and the east coast of the United States. No ideas came to him.

Back at his cubicle, he sat and bit into an almond nougat bar, chewing until he reached its creamy sweet interior. The coffee complemented the feeling in his heart, bitter and hot.

This was a low-probability search. He cursed his fates. Soon he might be out of a job.

He wondered, where would I go if dangerous people were hunting me?

## CHAPTER 28

*August 21, 6:43 p.m.  
Highlands Inn,  
Carmel Highlands, California*

From their table in the dining room of the Pacific's Edge restaurant, Cassie watched the sun reflect on the ocean waves as they pounded the rocks directly below them. The food she'd ordered emitted wonderful aromas. She used a hand to wave their essence into her nostrils. She'd been hungry when they arrived, and her lobster bisque and duck breast in a raspberry sauce were just the right touch on the sweet side, and delectable.

She was aware that Lee and she had each put on at least five pounds in under three weeks. There was no exercise room at the hotel. The paths up and down stairs were too busy to use them for exercise. And even the heated swimming pool wasn't keeping weight off them. They spent over \$5,000 per week at the hotel, paid for courtesy of the funds she'd stolen from Muslim extremists. And since those funds had originally come from the United States government, Cassie felt they were her separation pay.

Lee was speaking about his parents' many visits to the area, but she hardly heard him, relishing the flavors of the meal, her mouth slowly chewing. Lee remarked that his knowledge of California mirrored her own. She smiled when he said, "The Highlands Inn is one of the best hotels in America, hands down."

She gazed from their table overlooking the Pacific Ocean cliffs. She'd always had a weakness for luxury hotels—the perfumed soaps, jetted bathtubs, plush terrycloth robes—and now she could afford the best. She hoped their forged identity documents would keep them safe.

He said something else, but she wasn't listening. His expression bore concern, as if he'd read her mind. "We'll need to keep checking out and

then back in so no one gets suspicious of us. But maybe the best way to do this is for you to just hack into the registration desk's computer and keep switching the identities we use at the hotel. Okay?"

\* \* \*

Lee could see the happiness in her face and stopped complaining.

His cell phone vibrated with an incoming email. Intoxicated from having emptied a rare bottle of Pavona Pinot Noir Reserve 2009 at dinner, he read Major Shimmel's message twice to ensure that he understood its implications. Shimmel had proposed twenty new tactical moves and each could be combined in over seventy-five sets into unique strategies, every one having a different and descriptive code-name. Each one counteracted some specific problem, such as lack of information about enemy forces, fighting against sudden flanking forces, or bad weather. Lee had been overwhelmed by the simplicity of the approach. Here was something that he could finally be happy about.

Ainsley had never seen anything like it and thought it mirrored the organization of a football playbook. He approved of Shimmel's approach. It exceeded his expectations by a wide margin. He thought for a few seconds while Cassie finished her crême brûlée.

Lee keyed a reply into his cell phone and hit the Send key:

Thanks and congratulations, Major. Consider accepting my offer of promotion to General-in-Charge of Swiftshadow Consulting Group, with total responsibility for all of military operations. This position is *not* a merc assignment. I plan it to be a full-time board-level, Director-level position in our new company. If you agree, please reply. I'd like to meet with you in person to discuss our offer.

He terminated the email transmission and pocketed the cell. Then he touched Cassie's cheek and turned her head to watch the sunset, dead center above the rocky Carmel Highlands shoreline.

They strolled to the bar for drinks and then headed back to their room for the evening. She turned on the faucet to their Jacuzzi tub, stripped off her clothing, and splashed into the hot water.

Shimmel's reply came back twenty minutes later, as Lee sat in a plush

chair in their room:

I'll accept under these conditions. First, my primary interest is wholesale slaughter of Muslim extremists. Don't waste my time with corporate intrigue or simple drug cartels. Second, when you can't occupy me with my heart's delight, I must be free to accept assignments from those who can supply me (on a temporary basis). Third, I will have a vote at board of directors' meetings to ensure Swiftshadow maintains a direction that continues to please me. Should you agree, please reply.

Lee knew he'd need Cassie's approval for any change in Swiftshadow Consulting. After all, she'd created it. He undressed and entered the Jacuzzi tub at the opposite side from her. "Whoa, that's hot." He thought about how best to present his proposal for Shimmel's involvement. Her eyes opened as he sat there.

He'd never been in a jetted tub with her before.

Her brows rose. "Well? What's up?"

He could see the focused expression on her face, her naked body deep within the tub. "Why does there have to be something up?"

She swung her foot, her toes batting his penis. "No games, Lee. Just tell me."

"Sheesh. Okay. Well, see, I'd like to promote Shimmel to general, on a full-time basis with Swiftshadow Consulting Group. Give him stock and a board seat."

"You want to *what*?"

Lee shrunk as far away as he could, into a tiny corner of the tub. He reached outside its lip and handed her the paper copy of the email he'd printed and placed there for this exact moment. "Cassie, the deal he proposed is quite reasonable. The only question is, if we live through this, what do we do for the rest of our lives? Will we run a real consulting company or is this just a self-defense vendetta?"

She took a deep sigh. She didn't want to admit it, but if they survived this, there was always the issue of what she and Lee would do for the remainder of their lives. "Okay. You're right. I'll meet with him as soon as you can arrange it. As for the future, should we survive this, yes, I want

there to be a Swiftshadow Consulting Group, so I suppose we'll need a corporate organization and a board of directors."

She frowned. "Next time, though, I'd appreciate your discussing with me in advance what you intend with my creations. This wasn't fair."

Lee grinned back. "Okay, then."

\* \* \*

It took over two hours the next day for Avram Shimmel to drive forty miles from the bivouac near Camp Roberts, down the Nacimiento-Fergusson Road to Highway One, then north up the highway to the Carmel Highlands.

As he entered their hotel suite, he saw her watching him, taking stock of him, and hoped what she saw was a bright man, walking stiff, aged beyond his years, six-foot-seven-inches tall, huge in every way. But he wondered if she caught the darkness behind his eyes, as if he were haunted.

Before he sat, he introduced himself, shook Lee's hand, and kissed the top of Cassie's wrist. "Lieutenant Ainsley offered me a generous proposal, and I'm quite inclined to accept." With an Israeli accent, he pronounced the word, "left-tenant." "I've met with the lieutenant several times and I'm sure he's read my dossier. But I believe meeting you face-to-face is essential, Ms. Sashakovich. Before we discuss his offer, I want us to come to an understanding."

\* \* \*

Cassie examined Shimmel's expression. It was rock solid, confident yet easygoing, and charismatic. "Let's start with who each of us is. Lee, you first."

Lee shifted in his seat. "Well, I'm a former Director of Information Security for an intelligence agency of the United States government. I'm familiar with our training area, since I was born in Santa Barbara. I was a lieutenant in the US Army, graduated from West Point, but I've never been in combat." Ainsley sat back.

She stared right into Shimmel's eyes. "My name is Cassandra Sashakovich, and I was a covert field operative with the agency, where my code name was "Swiftshadow." I have never been in any chain of command within any armed force. I have a PhD in economics. For the agency, I



crafted econometric forecasts for Middle Eastern governments while I hacked in-country suspected terrorist bank accounts, stole and moved money from them to the bank accounts of friendly countries. And, Major Shimmel, you should know before you decide whether or not to accept Lee's offer that neither of us has a business background. Not only that, but the Houmaz branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has a fatwa on my life. They've tried more than once to kill me. Lee and I both believe they also have a fatwa on him."

She motioned toward Shimmel. "Tell us about yourself."

The big man fit tightly in the chair. He tucked the bottom of the uniform jacket under his bulk. Seated, he was at least four inches taller than Lee and more than a foot taller than Cassie. He was twice as wide as Lee and none of it was fat. Shimmel drew himself erect. His hands moved through the air while he spoke. "As you know, I was Israeli tank commander in Lebanon and served in over twenty major combat missions. I became major in the Israeli Defense Force. I was moved into Mossad as a covert undercover operative, responsible for counterterrorism activities in the Gaza Strip. But what you don't know is that my wife and two young daughters died in Tel Aviv, victims of a car bomb set by Tariq Houmaz. It left my life empty, and I resigned."

Cassie remembered the dream she'd had where she'd felt her own death. The car bomb Avram spoke of stirred her. She shivered in her seat, feeling the pain she'd experienced in her nightmare.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and she could see the tears falling. "After several months I rethought my purpose. Now I want nothing more than revenge: to kill Muslim extremists. I am founder of your mercenary army and reassumed my military rank of major. Since leaving the Mossad, I have slain over seventy Muslim terrorists and find it gives me great pleasure to watch them die. I choose my assignments according to where I can find the greatest opportunity to kill more."

She couldn't see them, but she imagined he was followed by a complete retainer of ghosts, including not just his dead wife and children, but also the soldiers who died under his command and the hundreds of men and women his soldiers killed. Evan's ghost touched her shoulder and her head jolted, but when she looked, he was gone.

Shimmel bowed his head before moving on. "If you accept the

conditions I sent back in my response to Lieutenant Ainsley, you can have me for military operations. My leadership capabilities are known throughout our camp in the mountains. As for my business experience, it's limited. I worked for three years while in university as a kibbutznik, serving as the business manager. I am especially impressed by your claim to be nothing more than what you are. I'd like to work with you as equals, and await your decision."

Shimmel smiled sheepishly. Cassie felt instant trust coming from him. She also decided she could trust him.

He said, "Oh, yes, and there is one more important thing: I would strongly advise a team of bodyguards for you—men you can trust with your lives—at least until we complete this operation. I can find such men for you. It would be a terrible shame if you were both assassinated before we got paid for our work. I recommend a team of five. Surely if you can afford all the men and materiel here, that many armed bodyguards should be a trivial expense."

Cassie looked to Lee, and he nodded in acceptance. "Okay, Major. You're now General Shimmel, and we agree to everything you've requested. And, yes, get us bodyguards. Please select a replacement for yourself as a 'major.' And, if you don't mind, from now on, first names only, Avram."

Cassie sat still in thought for a few seconds. Even with this great leader, their chances of success were slight. She sighed. Better to die trying than to die running.

\* \* \*

As he left the room and headed for his car to take the long trip back to camp, Shimmel mumbled to himself about the meeting. "Cassandra runs the show and the lieutenant is there for her amusement."

\* \* \*

Sultan Raman sat below deck in a large shipping container within the ship as it motored through the Atlantic Ocean about 600 miles due east of Halifax. Raman crafted a text message on his cell and then piggybacked onto the ship's wireless network, sending it to Pesi Houmaz: "One week

until we reach Halifax. All is as planned.”

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## CHAPTER 29

*August 22, 11:32 a.m.  
Headquarters of Gilbert Greenfield's  
unnamed intelligence agency,  
K Street, Washington, DC*

Bob Gault sat behind his desk at agency headquarters. Papers covered his desk, sorted into piles by location and sequenced within pile by date. Most of the pages were email messages and some were blog postings.

He'd just had a break in his search for the two missing agency employees. The agency's surveillance system used ECHELON to provide automatic flags on suspicious emails. It had highlighted one from a former Mossad operative accepting a permanent position as someone's bodyguard. Gault's search routine had been running for two days. It focused on all emails including those using encryption methods only the agency could solve. To see if the message he'd found was significant, he searched for retiring and fired bodyguards. Including drug cartels. There weren't any. So someone raised to a lofty level had both the cash and the fear required to want armed protection. *Slim odds this search will be successful.* But so far it was all he had.

Gault traced the endpoints of the email, looked for the email provoking the response, and kept trying until it was near midnight. Then, exhausted, he gave up and drove home. He walked into the bathroom of his tiny studio apartment in Georgetown, brushed his teeth, and stripped. He patted the photograph of his former wife. Although she'd divorced him, he still loved her. As he dropped into bed, he wondered where she was tonight and who she was with.

By now, he'd examined the travel roster and determined the missing employees were Sashakovich and Ainsley. No one else had as long an

unexplained absence as they did.

In the wee hours of the morning, he had a dream where a lone woman with one bodyguard was slaughtered wholesale by a team of three assassins. The dream repeated, but this time there were two bodyguards. The woman was fatally wounded but the assassins were decimated. On the third repetition, there were four bodyguards, and the woman remained safe while the bodyguards easily dealt with the assassins.

His own visage appeared in the dream and spoke to him. *One bodyguard might not be enough. Find out if there are other bodyguards being recruited.*

His eyes snapped open and he dashed to the bathroom, washed, dressed, and flew out the door, heading back to the office with a smirk on his face. *Now I have a real clue. How many bodyguards is Sashakovich hiring? And who are they?*

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## CHAPTER 30

*August 24, 6:54 a.m.  
A run-down apartment building,  
corner of Ben Gurion Boulevard  
and Ben Yehuda Street,  
Tel Aviv, Israel*

Lester Dushov scratched his long nose, shifted his glasses back up on its bridge, and pulled his rolling suitcase from the front door of his apartment. He walked into the street, oblivious to the slum of poor immigrants and the neighborhood's lack of fit with all of Israel's other cities, where the ancient Middle East prevails. Dushov smiled at the distant skyline, the epitome of "making the desert bloom." Tel Aviv's high technology industry had served him well. The name itself, "Tel Aviv," meant "ancient new."

He was neither tall nor short, not fat nor thin. With the exception of his long, bent nose, Dushov was a man so common-looking, no one ever noticed him. Perfect for a covert operative. He hailed a passing taxicab. "Take me to Natbag. The International Terminal." The cabbie nodded and drove toward Ben Gurion airport.

Using the cabbie's rear-view mirror, Lester noticed a van following his taxi. *Probably nothing, but old habits don't die off.*

Two days ago, Avram Shimmel, his old comrade in Mossad, had offered him the opportunity to come out of retirement and serve as a bodyguard for two people Shimmel had described as "friends who also want to kill Muslim extremists." Dushov was an old hand at military operations and covert work. Before working at "the Office," he'd been a captain in the IDF, a direct report to Avram Shimmel. And he'd also worked at Israel's Ness Ziona research facility, where he'd helped develop a host of exotic hypnotics and poisons.

He'd called four of his former associates on behalf of Shimmel, recruiting all of them as bodyguards. All five had served together in the past, and continued to be friends. He looked at his wristwatch. They should each be in taxicabs on their way to meet him at the airport.

Out of habit, his eyes watched the reflection of the van following them. More out of curiosity than fear, he continued following the van's progress as both vehicles neared the airport. By the time his taxi pulled to a stop in front of the El Al terminal, he'd confirmed that it was following *him*.

As he sat quietly in the back seat, he loaded six plastic bullets into his vinyl-composite automatic air pistol, a gun too advanced to be detected by even El Al's airport security. He shoved the gun up the left sleeve of his brown herringbone sport jacket into a specially designed pocket just past his wrist. When he tapped the button at the end of the sleeve, the gun would drop into his hand.

He leaned over the seat and placed cash on the driver's seat, feeling the familiar adrenaline surge of impending danger. Missing for so long from his life, it was like a drug boosting him higher than a kite.

He said, "Shalom" and left the cab, smiling at the driver and pointing to the money. He pulled the suitcase behind him toward the terminal door with his right hand. As he walked, he looked in the glass of the terminal windows, watching the reflection of the man who'd exited the van and followed him.

He walked slowly, searching for his four comrades. When he saw them, he motioned with his right arm to the butt of the hidden sidearm in his left sleeve and pointed with his eyes behind him. Ari Westheim, the closest, nodded. This was a well-practiced maneuver they used to trap unfriendlies while in Mossad. Ari appeared preoccupied, stroking his thick moustache as Lester walked by him, and the two whispered signals as they passed. Then, as their suspect passed, Ari turned and followed two steps behind, motioning to the other three former Mossad men.

Seconds later, Lester stopped suddenly and bent over, looking as if he'd dropped something. Their suspect was also forced to halt, unable to follow someone who stood still and unwilling to step past his quarry. Ari brushed up against their suspect and apologized to him while, on the man's other side, another of the former Mossad men, Shimon Tennenbaum,

slapped a tiny syringe into the suspect's neck.

Lester scanned the area. They were in luck. No police nearby. He faced them. "Ari, left side, Shimon, right. Turn him toward the terminal so no one can see he's unconscious. Keep him from falling. Keep his gun hand up, pointed to me. Make it appear that he has me under his control." Lester moved against the terminal and turned, hands in the air, appearing to anyone driving by the terminal the victim of an armed holdup. He searched the traffic looking for the van.

Seconds later, almost out of nowhere, the cream-colored van screeched to a halt and its back door flew open. Lester jumped into the street and aimed the silenced .22 caliber Beretta into the van, shooting the driver in the back of the head. Ari, gun drawn, aimed at the two men in the back of the van. In Arabic, he said, "Hands on top of your heads and drop to your knees or you're dead in two seconds. One—"

They fell off their seats in fear and onto their knees as ordered. Ari scanned the van. He called out, "Les, come look at this," and handed him a few sheets of paper. The papers were orders in Arabic to take Lester Dushov alive, use truth drugs to find out his ultimate destination, and then dispose of his corpse.

"Our travel itineraries have just changed." Dushov looked apologetically at his friends. "It looks as if we'll miss our flight. Into the van. Back to my apartment. I have some 'candy' we can feed these slugs. I want to know everything they know."

Soldiers ran toward them and Dushov flashed his Mossad credentials. "These are terrorists. We're taking them to the Shabak Interrogations Centre." He got behind the wheel of the van and gunned the engine. In seconds they were gone.

\* \* \*

The five former Mossad ops agents drove the van into the alleyway adjacent to Dushov's apartment and found a large laundry gurney in the basement. They used it to transport their captives to his apartment. At this part of the day most people were at work, and they drew no attention to themselves.

The three captives were trussed like Thanksgiving turkeys ready for



the oven, alive, lying on their bellies, gagged. Their hands, tied behind their backs, were joined by rope connecting to their bound feet. The tight ropes bowed their backs to the point of pain. Ari took a syringe and looked at Les. “How long?”

“Doesn’t really matter, as long as we get at least fifteen minutes.”

Ari nodded and filled the syringe part way with a cloudy liquid. He moved his left hand around on one of their captives’ necks, tapping with his middle finger until he was satisfied he’d found the right spot. Then he eased the needle into the captive’s neck. “Give him ten seconds, just to be sure. I wonder what they’d have done to you, Les, to extract the intel they were sent for. This is a kinder, gentler way.” Ari grinned.

Shimon moved to the front of the captive and turned him over so they faced each other. He smiled through a close-shaved stubble beard at the man. In flawless Arabic, he said, “I am your friend and a friend of your people. I can help you escape from these men, who are here to torture you to death. Only I can help you, but you must accept me as your friend. Do you want my help?” The panicked captive nodded. “Then you must tell me your name.”

From his expression, it was evident the man was now ruled by fear. “I am Haseim.”

Shimon smiled, patting the man’s shoulder. “Very good. Haseim, tell me who sent you so I can warn your comrades and keep them from dying.”

The captive blurted out the words. “Pesi Houmaz. He called my brother, Achmed. Achmed instructed me to have Dushov taken alive and interrogated.”

Shimon nodded solemnly. “How can I warn Achmed? I must tell him Dushov is on his way now to execute him.”

\* \* \*

In under an hour, the former Mossad operatives had heard the same story repeated three times. Lester called a contact at Mossad named Geller and gave him the contact info for Achmed. His friend at Mossad said, “We’ll take Achmed alive if possible, and then discover all we can. I’ll call you with an update within a day.”

Lester went to the kitchen and removed another vial from the

refrigerator. “This one should do the job. Takes about three hours. My friends at Ness Ziona research told me they’ll die in more pain than we could deliver in two years of constant torture. It starts with them feeling as if their blood is on fire.” He handed the vial to Ari, who filled the syringe. “I’ll get a laundry bin big enough for all three. After you do them, we’ll cart their bodies to their van. Then we’ll drive the van back to the airport and put it into long-term parking. Shimon, get a cleaning kit from my pantry.” Lester opened the El Al app on his cell and grunted. “With luck, we can change planes at JFK and still land in San Jose on time.”

\* \* \*

Pesi Houmaz listened to the report on his cell phone, his face displaying none of the rage boiling inside him. “All four of them? Killed by one man? Please explain how this happened. How can one man kill four well-armed and well-trained soldiers?” He took a deep breath and listened to the voice from Gaza. “You say he shot one and then *tortured* three? How?” He listened to his contact tell him the remainder of the story. “And you can’t reach Achmed? Mossad? Wait, how did Dushov torture them?”

“Their blood was turned to a gummy substance? Their hearts...had been slowly cooked?”

He wiped his sweaty brow. He imagined with alarm what Dushov had found out. He’d told his men too much, been too confident nothing bad would happen.

Pesi placed the phone back in its cradle and frowned. He feared telling his brother. Things were unraveling. He sighed and picked the phone back up. He’d just have to lie.

\* \* \*

Bob Gault sat at his desk and studied the report. He’d hacked all the intel he could about his little off-the-wire assignment and realized too late what he’d been recruited for. His handler wasn’t interested in helping to save the two AWOL agents. No, his handler had sold them out. Either that, or someone else had. Either way, third-party stringers had tried and failed to eliminate the bodyguards, and failed in their mission.

Now, he was convinced their failure would end his career.

How could an experienced team of assassins be captured and tortured by a single target? Dushov couldn't be that good, could he? He gulped down several candy bars, chewing fiercely as if consuming them would mitigate his panic. Gault had performed to spec, found the needle in the haystack, given it to his boss, and, until ten minutes ago had thought nothing could go wrong. The damn ragheads had somehow snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. At best this would keep him from ever getting a promotion.

Gault thought for a second, considered the possible moves he could make, calculated the probable outcomes. His handler might punish him by terminating his career or possibly even his life. Gault could pin the fault on the idiots someone else had hired and pray his handler would forgive him. Neither had much hope of working. He could report his handler's black op to the handler's superior, but this alternative would very likely take him down the tubes along with his handler. None of these were likely to save him.

He thought, *I'm truly and totally fucked to oblivion. Now, the largest probability for success is to screw my handler.* He made his decision.

Gault accessed the bank codes his handler had given him. Less than \$250,000 remained. He sent it all to a numbered, secured bank account he'd created for himself in Switzerland on one of his vacations there. Nothing to it, he thought. He knew his handler would need a reason to fire a senior manager. It'd take the handler weeks to figure it out and set Gault up. He had enough time to set his handler up first, and ruin him. Turnabout, plain and simple.

Gault forgot about the two delinquent agency employees and declared war on his handler. He decided not to tell his handler the ragheads had failed to capture the former Mossad agent. His handler would find out soon enough.

\* \* \*

For the fifth time in the four hours since it arrived, the mole read the email from the terrorists. Staring at the screen, the mole's mouth was a thin, tense line. Never had the mole been so desperate. Now the Houmaz brothers would murder the mole's spouse and son in some horrific way. And then

Houmaz would come for the mole. There was no way to protect the mole's family. It didn't even pay to set Gault up. There wasn't enough time.

There was one slim chance that might work: help Sashakovich and Ainsley hunt the Houmaz family. In an instant, the mole decided to help and guide them, not kill them. The mole's thoughts moved from one logical path to the other in a flash. Adjusting to this reversal of fortune might be beyond most people, but flexibility in planning was a required skill for the mole as one of the agency's senior managers.

\* \* \*

Lester Dushov, Ari Westheim, Shimon Tennenbaum, JD Weinstein and Michael Drapoff sat around a large corner table at the Highlands Inn's Pacific's Edge restaurant.

Lee Durley, a blues musician, played old tunes with his partner on a piano, sound drifting in from the bar overlooking the Pacific.

Across from the bodyguards, Avram Shimmel, Lee Ainsley, and Cassandra Sashakovich listened as they drank glasses of an oak-scented 2006 Tudor Chardonnay. Cassie swirled the wine in its glass. She'd chosen it because it was robust enough not to be overpowered by the pork belly sautéed in a port wine demi-glace. She offered Lee a bite from her fork. As Lee ate some, the others looked at the dish. Their expressions of disgust made Cassie giggle.

She found herself happy and relaxed around these men, stretching her arms out as far as she could to loosen her shoulders. She placed a small bit of the pork belly on her tongue and savored its salty yet buttery flavor. Cassie found the bodyguards' story even more compelling than the scent and taste of the food and wine. In between swallows, she asked, "Does Houmaz have access to sophisticated telecommunications software? Could they have programmed an email search routine to find you?"

Michael Drapoff, the handsome tech expert in the group, answered. "No way. Even Mossad doesn't have the budget to develop this type of detection hardware and software. It would have to be this mole of yours sending the intel on to Houmaz." He examined the chardonnay and swirled it in its glass.

Cassie's mind raced. "They've had a string of failures hunting us

down. Maybe the mole isn't giving them all the intel he gets, or maybe—”

“Not so, Cassie,” Lee interrupted. “Recall the email I tracked from the mole when you were at the Algonquin in Manhattan.”

Cassie nodded. “Of course. So then Houmaz just keeps underestimating our capabilities.”

There was silence at the table for a few seconds.

“There's more,” said Lester. He polished his eyeglasses with his shirt and returned them to the bridge of his nose. “You already know Pesi Houmaz runs the front office in Riyadh, recruiting Muslim extremists, and his brother, Tariq, is in charge of ops and training. Tariq's main force is located in an Afghanistan mountain cave system, very close to the old Tora Bora caves. Their father is a rich man, made his money in the oil business back in the 70s before Iran went fundamentalist. And there's a third brother, now running the oil business as an OPEC director for dear old dad. His name is Achmed and we don't think he's involved with terrorism.”

Courtesy of her Mossad bodyguards, Cassie had enough intel now for a more detailed scan of Houmaz. She decided that if Achmed Houmaz was harmless, she'd let him live. But she need more intel on him to be sure and marked it as an urgent task on her to-do list. “It seems you five aren't just bodyguards. Sounds like you have good covert skills as well.”

The five former Mossad operatives wore sheepish expressions as they looked at one another and broke into laughter. Dushov said, “In addition to reporting to ‘General’ Shimmel, back when he was just ‘Major’ Shimmel in the IDF, and then working for him at Mossad, each of us has a special focus area. For example, with me, chemistry, especially for interrogation and killing. For Shimon, a PhD in psychology and hypnosis, also useful in interrogation. Ari works in martial arts, Michael is a tech expert in telecommunications and hacking. And JD—Jacob David—knows both explosives and automatic weapons. We'll serve you as bodyguards and can also fill in these other areas whenever you want.”

Cassie nodded. “Do you have access to Mossad's labs?”

Drapoff returned the nod. “Yes, of course. You have need of the lab?”

She turned to Lee. “Give him the evidence you lifted from the agency's basement terminal.” Lee disappeared for a few minutes, returning with the sheet of paper containing the slabs of Scotch tape. She took it and handed it to Michael. “Can Mossad process the prints and DNA contained

here?”

Drapoff examined the evidence. “Yes, I think so. I’ll send it out express mail today to Captain Geller at the Ness Ziona in Herzliyya. It may take a few days.”

Cassie nodded. Shimmel had brought her so much more than he’d promised. “Well done, Avram.” She was grateful Lee had suggested promoting Shimmel. But then a dark thought grew within her. They were still so far away from success and so many things could still go wrong. *Well, it’s up to me to keep that from happening.*

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## CHAPTER 31

*August 24, 8:12 a.m.  
Aboard the freighter Jean Moreau,  
70 kilometers from Toronto, Canada*

The container below decks on the freighter was marked “Beluga Caviar.” Sultan Raman sat on a barrel serving as his chair, rocking his body to the motion of the boat as it traveled up the Saint Lawrence.

One of his men, Abu Aziz, huge and muscled, nudged his arm and pointed toward the door.

Raman could hear the scuffling sound, closer now. He put his finger to his lips. The team members froze to avoid discovery by the boat’s crew.

The noise was no longer just footsteps. The door handle moved. Someone was testing the lock. Whoever was outside was persistent. Caviar from Beluga was a valuable but perishable commodity. Pesi Houmaz had chosen this as their cover since he’d stated it might get them through customs at the US border from Canada. But one of the crew might be interested in smuggling out some of the nonexistent caviar jars as a “bonus.”

Raman signaled to Aziz. The big man unsheathed his knife and moved to the door.

The lock outside clicked in release and the door handle moved again. The door slowly opened. A crewman appeared in the doorway holding a broom. He reacted to Aziz’s knife by hitting Aziz in the solar plexus, doubling him over, then drew a throwing knife and aimed it at Raman. Raman ducked just in time but he’d been standing in front of another of his team.

Raman turned as the knife flew past him and watched it skewer his teammate just below the sternum. Blood sprayed as the man died before

hitting the floor. The splashback flooded Raman's eyes, blinding him. The crewman picked up the knife Aziz dropped before anyone could react and threw it toward Raman. Raman ducked and twisted out of the way.

Aziz drew his back-up knife and slashed at the crewman. The man went down, his neck sliced all the way to his spine. But not before the knife he'd thrown at Raman hit another of the men in the arm.

Sultan stood there, stunned. In less than a minute he'd lost one man and had another wounded by an insignificant ship's crewman. Now he'd need to keep two dead bodies in the freight container, decomposing and stinking, until they docked in Toronto. He ripped a strip of cloth from the dead crewman's shirt, fashioning a tourniquet for his teammate.

What more could happen? If this was the will of Allah, then their mission might be doomed. He must prove this wrong.

Raman calculated he might still have enough manpower to complete his mission.



## CHAPTER 32

*August 24, 8:12 a.m.  
Highlands Inn,  
Carmel Highlands, California*

Living with bodyguards was tougher than Cassie hoped. She suspected they knew more about her than Lee did. One of them stood on station outside their room all night and another waited “on call.”

She assumed they knew what Lee and she did alone at night, down to the details of their sex. Cassie suspected they’d placed vid-cams in their room but knew if she confronted them, they’d say it was for her and Lee’s safety. By the middle of the second day, she considered ways to use this inconvenience to her and Lee’s advantage. She asked Ari, “Can you give us both lessons in martial arts?” And she asked JD, “Can you give us lessons in automatic handguns and high explosives?”

Both were eager to help, and while their mercs completed training in the Ventana Wilderness, Cassie and Lee improved their self-defense skills.

JD smiled and pushed a large lock of red hair back in place. He shook his head. “You can’t hit the broad side of a barn, Cassie.” She knew it was true.

She wondered if her abilities were limited to computers, banking, and economics. She faced JD. “Well, I did. Once. In Manhattan a few months ago I killed three men with three shots in under five seconds.” She examined the gun as if the fault with her marksmanship today might be with it. “Damn.”

“Pure luck.” JD shook his head. “I’ll teach you high explosives but with a focus on a theoretical basis, to avoid having you become the victim of your own accident.”

\* \* \*

Two days later, Avram Shimmel knocked on the door to their room. He moved inside silently, like a panther stalking prey. “Some news for you both. The men are ready. The three of us need to make logistic decisions for the two ops we’re to carry out.”

Cassie walked to a chair at the hotel room’s small kitchen table, and the men sat, one on either side of her. She pulled out her cell phone and turned it on. After pulling up the project management software, she frowned. “I’ll need just a day or two to finish arming and springing the trap. But please commence transport for the mercenaries now and have them ready as soon as possible. I’ve rented two jets, one for San Jose to Riyadh and one for San Jose to Jalalabad, Afghanistan. I’ll be done about the time your soldiers are in place.”

Avram nodded, and Cassie continued. “But I have to tell you about a complication I learned of this morning.” She pulled a single sheet of paper from her pocket and handed it to Avram.

He read the email, frowned, and asked, “This came from your mole?”

She said, “Yes. As I told you, the mole is either a Dire or an Ass Dire at the agency, with access to intelligence most people at the agency can’t see. The mole can send and receive messages on terminals with special security clearance. That’s how my cover was sold to Houmaz. He or she set me up and had me fired, marking me as a soft target for assassination.”

Shimmel shook his head. “Typical of American intelligence. In the old days, the CIA would sell their grandmothers for a song, and so, I gather, nothing has changed. In those times, the KGB routinely killed their own. MI6 had spies spying on each other and spying for other intelligence agencies as doubles and triples. The French and the Italians, well, they always were and still are more interested in food and sex than intel. And the Germans are serious but not at all creative.”

Shimmel shook his head. “So this mole claims he or she’s repenting. Can you believe anything a professional liar tells you?”

She considered this. “The mole must be desperate. At the agency, they train their senior managers to be flexible, and I think the mole is at the end of his or her rope trying to find us. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Houmaz people threatened the mole’s family and the mole turned, helping us instead of trying to get us killed.”

Shimmel smiled grimly. “Yeah.”

She pointed to the papers. “Just look at the offer. The mole has given us the agency intel we need to take out the Houmaz brothers in both Kabul and Riyadh. The intel validates what we already know, so at least this much must be true. And we’ve been given so much more. All the intel on guards and armed personnel. And all their ordnance info, types, and quantities. It’s all here.”

She handed him the thick packet she’d printed from the attachment. “The mole offered to send us real-time satellite imagery with a twelve-hour lead time.”

Shimmel shook his head. “How many times has the mole given intel to those who want to kill you?”

She hesitated for a moment, mulling over Shimmel’s warning. “I realize the mole is only doing what’s expedient. And you’re right. Using the intel is risky but the entire operation is risky. Look, I hate this person. He or she ruined my life. I’ll get even someday. But anything improving our odds is welcome, even if it holds its own risks. If you agree to receive the intel, you’re still free to disregard anything we get.”

Shimmel turned to the window. “My advice, Cassie, is keep copies of this email, just as you have with the email Lee collected during the Algonquin Hotel assassination attempt. You’ll have enough leverage to use this person for whatever you wish, whenever you want, for the rest of their life.”

She nodded in silence. After all, it was still possible this was a trap. She was unsure whether to follow Avram’s advice.

During this exchange Lee kept silent. He shifted his eyes following their argument as if he was watching a tennis match. When they were both silent, he spoke. “Not to change the subject, but speaking again of intelligence, our own little Mossad branch has been cooling their heels and they got bored. Les and Ari hacked into Mossad’s intel systems and were able to download some interesting stuff.”

“Like?”

“It seems there’s a stream of payments between Washington and Riyadh, but not to the Saudi government or to the royal family. They didn’t have the hacking skills to go any deeper.”

“But I do.” Cassie made another mental note on her to-do list. She already suspected what she’d find. Were these payments the result of the

project she'd declined when it was offered her by the West Wing?

\* \* \*

Two days later, the trap was almost set. Cassie had worked faster than she thought she could, despite the fact she did it all alone, to give the independent hackers she'd hired deniability should they ever be questioned by the authorities.

She heard someone knocking on the door to her room. She opened it and saw Michael Drapoff's smiling face. He handed her a manila folder. "DNA and fingerprint analysis. Arrived a few minutes ago. Your mole's identity, but only if you can hack the agency's records. That's where you'll find a match."

She considered the problem. Lee was responsible for all the security hoops used by the agency. "Thanks." She left the room after locking the door. She found Lee in the pool, lying on a float. "Sweetie, I need you right now."

He smiled. "But of course you do." He was already off the float and swimming to the ladder. "What's up?"

She shielded her eyes from the sun. "Come back to the room with me."

In less than five minutes, she'd closed the door. "We need to hack the agency and get to the personnel files. She held up the folder. "This contains the processed evidence, courtesy of Mossad."

He turned on a notebook computer next to the one she used and together they began the process. "I set up the security and firewalls to keep something like this from happening. And I'm really, really good at my job." Lee set up his notebook to emulate a mainframe terminal, requesting access, while she set hers to Google search mode, exploring a list of newsgroups with hacker solutions for bypassing passwords.

They worked steadily for several hours, but had nothing to show for it. As the sun set, Lee shook his head. "Sorry. It just ain't working. I'll need someone's ID and password to do this."

She nodded, but the little voice in the back of her head wondered if Lee had tried hard enough. After all, if he was the mole, it wouldn't be in his interest to unmask himself. Was he lying to her, even now?

She put that thought aside.

\* \* \*

Cassie researched the stream of Middle Eastern electronic payments. Soon she was certain they came from the system she'd declined to develop. She took special care to remain silent about the tasks related to discovering the West Wing's involvement in funding the Houmaz Muslim extremists. She found hacking the West Wing much easier now. Their systems loaded all the security at the front end, almost all of it within the firewall.

Within the project documentation, she discovered the SWIFT wire transfer codes used, along with a listing of the bank endpoints. Cassie made copies of the files and found email memos approving the actual funds transfers—from the United States Treasury Department to numbered current accounts she knew belonged to Pesi and Tariq Houmaz. She copied these as well.

She'd believed the feds had been funding terrorists and then sending her to steal the money back. Now, here was the proof. It gave a new depth and dimension to the term "recycling."

She feared there would be reprisals from the agency if they ever found out she knew. She felt disgusted with her government. How could they even consider doing something so heinous?

She'd need to hold this evidence as protection. But it would have to be done in some way that guaranteed the agency couldn't kill her and bury her body with the threat her evidence posed.

She'd developed the skills to program a "time-bomb" to send all the intel files she had accumulated to every news service on earth, including Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language news network. And now she used those skills. The data would automatically be decrypted and sent if she didn't key a numeric password every four days. And that password would be changed by the program using the date in a mathematical formula commonly used in financial calculations. Not foolproof, but good enough and easy for her to remember. She placed the program and the encrypted data in a hidden directory within her web server in Chechnya.

The idea of her government supporting terrorism was so difficult to envision, she wondered if she would someday conveniently forget to key the password and thereby trigger dissemination of the data.

Her West Wing hack gave her the endpoints for all the Houmaz bank

accounts. What had they used the money for? She hacked into every major bank in the Muslim world, searching for the private bank accounts Tariq and Pesi Houmaz had sent the funds on to. Their primary bank was the Bank of Trade, and it had inferior security making it easy. The password for the bank's Security Administrator was set to "Mohammad."

Cassie found Tariq Houmaz made routine payments for amounts in the range of about \$25,000 each to three bank accounts every month. She tracked the cash through SWIFT's bank-to-bank EFT network to its endpoints. Tribal leaders, men in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, owned the destination bank accounts. She did a bit more research and discovered he had his camp situated in the Spin Ghar mountains, near the village of Upper Pachir.

Working with this intel left her feeling filthy, as if she'd immersed herself in sewage.

From her agency briefings, she recognized a few of the names owning the bank accounts as leftover Taliban gangsters. The power of these hoodlums depended on the size and proficiency of the armed gangs they ruled. Cassie guessed the cash Houmaz paid to the tribal lords was protection money.

*Now I'll steal and use their money.* Removing the funds might remove the gangsters' support. Cassie moved the money—all of it—from the accounts of the tribal leaders back to the Houmaz bank accounts and left a clumsy trail of evidence back. *I wonder how long it will take for the tribal lords to discover the Houmaz brothers took back everything?*

Next she moved everything from all the Houmaz bank accounts to one of the agency's bank accounts, leaving a trail of SWIFT instructions pointing to the terminal in the agency's basement. The total amount was well in excess of a billion dollars.

Then, using the typical system administrator's ID and password, she moved most of the funds from that account to an unrelated numbered bank account she'd established with the password "Kahuna" for later distribution to her mercenaries, and then she prepared to hack SWIFT and deleted all the transaction trails.

She kept wondering what would happen if she failed in the crucial step of covering her tracks. Since SWIFT settles in net at the end of every day and not real-time, transaction by transaction, she had less than three hours

remaining in the day during issuance of the funds transfers to wipe clean every instruction.

She reached deep into the bowels of the originating bank computers, erasing the transaction detail trailers and modifying the sender data to reflect other accounts within the bank's account records.

She penetrated the bank funds transfer repair stations, found "one-off" corrections that could be modified to correspond with the transaction modifications she'd already made, creating a complete backtrail for each falsified transaction.

The easy part was erasing all traces of her ever having entered the bank computers from their network server records.

If she failed, it wouldn't be long before they traced it back to her and her plan would unravel. Each hack took about ten minutes and there were fourteen of them.

She found herself drifting occasionally, wondering what Lee's and her lives would be like if she survived the battles soon coming. Tomorrow might be the last day she ever spent with him. What if she survived? And then she shook her head to clear it, forcing herself back into the work at hand. After all, she still wasn't sure he wasn't the mole.

When she was finished, she felt satisfied but wasted, and dragged her body off to bed. It was just after the close of SWIFT, and Cassie was asleep in seconds.

\* \* \*

Lee let her sleep late into the morning. At noon, he pulled the blanket from her with care. She shifted a bit but kept snoring. "Cassie, are you okay?"

She stirred and stretched her arms. "Yeah. I dreamed we were old and married, and we had a teen-aged daughter and a black cat I'd rescued as a stray. We called the cat 'Gizmo.' Strange, though, I recognized our daughter's face but couldn't place her even though I know her. Very confusing." She shook the sleep from her eyes. "Why'd you wake me?"

"From your behavior, I guess you're finished arming the trap." He reached over to the nightstand and retrieved a bottle of 2011 Chandon Méthode Champenoise and two glasses. "Congratulations."

She yawned. He reached for the coffee pot on the countertop and filled

a cup for her.

She seized the cup, took a sip. Then she pulled him back. “Thanks for the champagne and the coffee. And I didn’t just arm the trap. I sprang it. Clock’s running as of 5 a.m. tomorrow.”

Time to fight.

\* \* \*

Avram Shimmel reviewed the reports on his desk, ticking off things accomplished on a Gantt chart depicting the timeline for events in the coming battle and the delivery logistics to support it. He flipped pages and cross-tied items to ensure all the loose ends remaining in his battle plan were being handled. *A two-location battle, each site a quarter of the world from the other, with forces outnumbering us many times.*

His expression was dour. So many endless details. The troops were all in place but only part of the matériel had arrived. He began writing questions in the margins of the supply logistics report. *What is due to arrive? When and where? What arrived damaged and is now in need of repair or replacement?* He needed at least one more of him to ensure his mercenaries were battle-ready.

He picked up the cell phone-equipped GNU radio and pressed in a number. “Major McTavish, this is General Shimmel. On your status report, it shows all matériel received at the depot outside Riyadh. Is this everything we ordered?” He listened to Alister McTavish utter one word—“yes”—and then asked, “And exactly what is the status of our Major LeFleur’s east Afghanistan delivery?” A few seconds later, he asked, “Have military matériel testers been deployed to both depots?” Then, after receiving another “yes,” Shimmel asked, “What is the current status of the matériel and when do you expect testing to be complete?”

This time McTavish spoke at length. Shimmel’s expression changed, his bushy eyebrows raised in alarm. He asked, “How many will need new parts? How long will repairs take?” He listened a few seconds and then said, “Too long. Figure out some way to get all in a state of tested readiness within two days for both sites. No, you can’t have more time. I’m giving you all the time I can! Just do it. Yes, and get your men prepared to deploy in three days. We’re going to attack then. That is, if you’re ready. Shimmel



out.”

\* \* \*

Lee barely had time to give Cassie a goodbye kiss and wish her luck before she boarded. The fleet of Learjets took off, one after another, from the private air terminal at San Jose’s Mineta International Airport.

On the ride back to the Highlands Inn, both Shimmel and Ainsley were silent. The sun was setting into the Pacific as the two men sat at the table in Cassie and Lee’s room. Shimmel read from his notes, reading glasses low on his nose. “We now have thirty men with tested matériel in the air-conditioned supply depot on the outskirts of Riyadh. Major McTavish commands in the city. We have seventy men in the foothills thirty miles southeast of Jalalabad, sitting in four air-conditioned supply transports outside the village of Upper Pachir. Major LeFleur commands in the hills. Major Giordella will coordinate communications between the city and hills. He’ll operate from Tel Aviv assisted by Michael Drapoff who can hack into Mossad after we initiate the blackout to keep the two Houmaz brothers from realizing they’re both under attack. Drapoff’s contacts within Mossad make him the point man of this operation.”

Shimmel faced Lee. “Everything will be ready for us to commence our attack in Upper Pachir less than one hour after you give the word.” General Shimmel’s eyes bored into Ainsley’s.

Lee rubbed his eyes. “What’s Cassie’s status?”

Shimmel read from one of the pages in his hand. “She’s with Major LeFleur in Upper Pachir. I tried to change her mind on this but she stated it’s personal and she refuses to stand down. The remaining four former Mossad agents are with her, yielding total manpower of seventy-five at the caves. However, she insists on keeping one jet ready for her and the Mossad personnel to carry them from Jalalabad to Riyadh as soon as the Muslim extremists in the caves have been rendered.”

Lee shuddered. He knew if she lived through the Afghanistan battle, she’d fly off to fight again in Riyadh without any rest. In the mirrored closet he saw his face reflecting the worry he felt. He wondered how effective she’d be, and how he’d function with his thoughts focused on work but his heart consumed with the dangers she faced.

His job was to work with Major Giordella and Michael Drapoff to jam communications on satellite phones, cell phones, and landlines between Riyadh and Afghanistan. With all remaining telecommunications dead, the GNU radio would be the only form of communications—voice and data—working in Riyadh or in Nangarhar Province. Drapoff and Major Giordella had developed a manual procedure to close down landlines using electromagnetic devices—EMP technology developed by Mossad—deployed by Majors LeFleur and McTavish from their locations.

Lee knew everyone and everything was good to go, but he worried something might not work. He muttered an old saying: “No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

“Thanks for the update, Avram. Give me some time alone. Okay?” He left the hotel room and walked aimlessly around the grounds for over an hour, fearing the worst. When he returned to the hotel room serving as command central for their missions, he found General Shimmel writing notes with a felt marker on a chalkboard:

#### Mission Upper Pachir Caves

- Approach caves
- Neutralize guards
- Mine cave exits
- Enter caves and execute all hostiles
- Collect weapons
- Meet with tribal leaders and determine if there are other Muslim extremist locales
- If additional Muslim extremists are found, determine if they have additional plans, per Cassie’s description of the phone conversation Ainsley retrieved between Pesi Houmaz and Abdul Hassain, her assassin in Riyadh
- Execute all Muslim extremists in all their locales, especially Tariq Houmaz

#### Mission Riyadh

- Approach compound
- Neutralize guards
- Enter compound and interrogate Pesi Houmaz. Do the brothers have other plans
- Execute Pesi Houmaz.
- Exit compound and return to California

Shimmel looked up and faced Lee. “Are you ready? If you are, we can start the attack in Afghanistan. Now.”

Lee looked at the chalkboard. So many things could go wrong. He nodded. “Yes.”

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## CHAPTER 33

*September 2, 8:12 a.m.  
4 miles due west of  
the village of Upper Pachir,  
Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan*

Cassie read the intel supplied by the mole. It was endless—hundreds of pages. She paced the area around the bivouac and scanned the barren mountainous horizon. The mercenaries were camped in the high country of the Spin Ghar mountains. Ragged foothills surrounded them, pocked with caves. Many of the caves had interconnecting tunnels. Although the area froze in winter, it boiled hot this summer day.

According to the intel, the cooler caves just a few miles away offered the terrorists their only respite. They'd used the area for years and abandoned camps littered the area around the mountains. They avoided spending daylight hours outside the caves, and when the sun went down, they performed night exercises.

The caves had been formed eons ago when prehistoric sliding limestone foundations settled into hardpan, leaving gaps or caves.

Tora Bora was a few miles down the road but the bombs dropped by the United States some years back—during the First Taliban War—had closed most of those caves.

Many of the remaining caves were large enough for the Houmaz mujahidin to live within. Some of the large caverns were used as depots for arms and ammunition.

Cassie faced Major Jacques LeFleur, a mercenary for most of his life. His large, muscled arms were obsidian in the sunlight. LeFleur walked to the truck, an aggressive expression on his face. From North Africa, his black skin worked better than camouflage for night missions. When he

passed where she stood, he didn't bother acknowledging her.

She knew he hadn't seen any action in the French army that spawned him. Her reports indicated he wasn't known for his intelligence, but he was a persistent man, driven by emotion. She believed he relied on his instincts to make tactical and operational-level decisions. He seemed to have little regard for strategy or mission—those were the province of top brass. He wanted to fight, not think.

She followed and watched him looking through his binoculars at the horizon, scanning for the tribal warlords that controlled the area around Upper Pachir. “Major, what is our current status?”

LeFleur stared at the checklist. His accent was a thick French and difficult for her to understand. “More than 10 percent of the equipment doesn't work and parts for repairs won't be available in time for this operation.” He pointed to a list of missing, damaged, and malfunctioning equipment. “One of the armored vehicles has a defective engine. Two of the bazookas arrived with incompatible ammunition. A sniper rifle is missing its scope. And one entire carton of hand grenades is missing from the delivery. But the General arranged for more than a 25 percent oversupply of all matériel. We're ready to roll as soon as we get word from him that Drapoff has severed communications between Riyadh and Nangarhar.”

\* \* \*

As the sun rose higher, LeFleur walked to the canvas chair in his campaign tent and reviewed reports his ops coordinator had printed for him. He matched these reports with the map of Nangarhar to which they applied. LeFleur's perimeter guards had found no trace of the feudal lords, and this made him uneasy. He muttered, “I suspect they are out there watching.”

He didn't believe Cassie's claim that if he and his troops didn't attack the caves, the warlords might attack by themselves. He'd heard her say the warlords believed Houmaz had raided their bank accounts but how could she know something like that? And even if she was correct, there were over seven hundred armed men in the caves.

He and seventy mercenaries along with Cassie and her four Mossad bodyguards were camped in the floor of the valley, hidden by a series of hills and valleys from the terrorist camp and their caves. Though his force

had an overwhelming advantage in technology, the ten-to-one body-count odds against him were a formidable numerical consideration.

Then there was the woman herself. Arrogant and insufferable. Women had no place on a battlefield. Yet here she was, along with her four Jewish spies, all wearing mercenary uniforms, battle helmets, and backpacks filled with technology toys. Whatever did they think they were going to do, besides get themselves killed? At least he'd managed to keep the female mercenaries out of his command. He faced her. "This place is going to be a battlefield. Dangerous for a woman. You can come along, but stay out of our way."

\* \* \*

Cassie didn't bother replying. She walked to her tent, holding her cell equipped with GNU radio. She wore an earbud. She called Shimmel, and he told her that the operation would begin soon. The conversation turned to the mole's intel. "I know you haven't any faith in him but just tell me, Avram, if the satellite photographs show heat sources from locals within ten miles of the caves."

Shimmel was the control for all three operations and had decided to remain in the Carmel Highlands, halfway around the world. He couldn't be in Tel Aviv, Nangarhar, and Riyadh all at the same time. "I'm examining the photos on a 48-inch TV. No, no one is visible. But they might be wearing heat-absorbing camouflage. Or the photos might have been altered by someone at the agency to mislead us."

She said, "Okay, then. Tell Drapoff in Tel Aviv to begin jamming communications. Leave the private channel open for our GNU radios. Contact me as soon as he starts and we'll commence our attack when you reply. Cassie out." Flanked by four of her bodyguards, she stood staring at the Land Rover as if the answer to all her hopes and dreams was within. The voice in her head remained quiet.

\* \* \*

Shimmel terminated the call and frowned. He faced Lee. "I pray her lack of combat experience doesn't lead to her death and the deaths of many others, all good men and women. She's very headstrong."

Lee sat next to him, his face a wall of worry.

Shimmel placed his next call to Major Giordella. Drapoff and the major had worked with the Mossad, using a new technology developed at Ness Ziona. The tech used a tightly focused continuous EMP beam to temporarily jam all telecommunications. It worked for about fifteen hours before failing. He'd prayed that the newer, better version in development would be available, but not yet. Would fifteen hours be long enough?

"Good day, Major. Is Drapoff ready?" He heard the response and smiled. "Excellent, then. Let's roll. Commence jamming in both Riyadh and Nangarhar Province."

\* \* \*

"Green light. Go. Go. Go."

Cassie nodded and one of her bodyguards turned the ignition of their Land Rover.

In front of her, the sun rose over the mountain crests. Five camouflaged trucks left dust trails in their wakes. The mercs hung to the railings of the vehicles crawling along the dirt road, up the valley into the Spin Ghar mountains. They picked up speed, engines shifting gears through the gorge bordered by sheer mountain walls.

The caravan sped five miles without the benefit of cover. Thick dust curtains followed the lead vehicle, tracking them better than any radar. Including the mercenary driver, fourteen armed fighters were on each truck, along with impressive electronic gadgetry and ordnance.

Every truck was equipped with a turret-mounted machine gun. Each soldier carried night-vision goggles for the caves, and each was supplied with several flash-bang concussive grenades in addition to the specially modified Ruger Mini-14s and over 12,000 rounds in specially designed clips holding 500 bullets each.

The trucks were loud enough to discourage any conversation among the soldiers, leaving each alone with his or her own thoughts, hopes, and fears.

Using instructions the mole had given her, Cassie had hacked the agency's computers in the early morning hours, generating recon photos from repositioned satellites showing all the cave entrances and exits.

Using the agency's satellite technology, she determined the paths of each tunnel through the mountain range. She knew the warlords had decamped and moved miles away so the noise wouldn't be a problem until they approached the Houmaz camp.

While she was within their network, past the agency's firewall, she tried hacking into the personnel files but found another firewall barrier. Rats on a stick! She still didn't know who the mole was.

Cassie and her four companions from Mossad followed the armored trucks in a Land Rover. Each carried a large knapsack filled with technology and armament treats for the hostiles within the caves. Major LeFleur also rode in the Land Rover.

Cassie found the lack of conversation oppressive. She looked around, watching the parched rocky hillside as they passed. A combination of hope and fear welled inside her. She shifted her thoughts rapidly to the register of her mercs, all male, to a listing of their armor, ammunition, and the supplies they'd packed for the upcoming battle.

Her recollection of LeFleur's chauvinistic actions and words intruded. She found him competent but she believed women brought a different vision to battle, one she thought was more creative and less brittle than that of men.

So the fifteen female mercs, mostly snipers, communications and explosives specialists, all from countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia, were with McTavish. They'd be waiting for her in Riyadh if she survived this battle.

The feudal tribesmen Houmaz used as guards were nowhere to be seen. The money Houmaz paid them having been stolen, there were no sentinels to raise an alarm. It was just as she'd planned.

It took two hours to traverse the rugged fifteen miles from their campsites into visual range of the caves. Landscape changed from the dry valley with towering cliffs on either side of the road to shifting hills with soaring crests. The trucks slowed and then coasted downhill, their engines no longer making noise. She could see the cave entrances half a mile away, and in front, the flat plateau the terrorists had used as a staging area for war exercises. It was empty, quiet now.

The day grew hotter, and she suspected they'd gone into the caves for respite. As the trucks ground to a stop, she heard the buzzing of flies. The



voice inside her head remained quiet. She calculated probabilities, then calmed herself until she felt no emotion.

As the mercs emptied from the vehicles, Cassie used her GNU radio to receive updates of the intel from the mole and send them to the heads-up displays of her mercenaries for the upcoming battle.

The mole's intel showed thirty-two tunnel entrances and seven of them showed infrared traces of human heat. Of the remaining twenty-five entrances, seven emitted nothing at all and eighteen had no connection to any heat source in any tunnel.

Of these seven logical target tunnels occupied by humans, all had both an entrance and a separate exit.

\* \* \*

The trucks halted just outside visual range of the tunnels. One of the mercs put up a tent with a campaign chair for Major LeFleur just in front of the Land Rover and out of the line of sight to the caves. The merc saluted and LeFleur said, "That'll be all, Corporal." The merc turned and ran to rejoin his team.

All members of the seven-man explosives team ran to wire the back exits of their seven tunnels with triggers reactive to human heat signatures. The explosives and trips they used would close the entrances when someone tried passing through. One of them went over a checklist. "Plastique to fuse." Another held his hand in thumbs-up position. "Fuse to detonator." Again, thumbs up. "Wireless ready." Another thumbs-up. Then they rejoined their battle teams.

LeFleur's force included seven such teams, one for each of the tunnels, each with a ten-man complement. These included one team leader, one explosives expert, one sniper armed with a Tango 51 sniper rifle and infrared scope, six attack soldiers armed with fully automatic Ruger Mini-14s, and one communications officer carrying the GNU radio with a wireless connection to a cell phone host through the Stillwater microSD card. The communications officer wore an infrared vid-cam atop his helmet, rigged to the GNU radio. In his tent, LeFleur watched the video sent by the vid-cams, but they were laggy, jagged, and dark.

All wore Kevlar body armor with ceramic plate inserts, bulky and

heavy. The armor was black in the bright, hot, summer heat but it was four times more effective than a simple Kevlar vest. One of the mercs complained, “Shit, I’m steamin’ in this Santa suit.”

Once the tunnel exits were rigged, each team entered its assigned tunnel. Cassie and her team waited behind, under cover in the command tent, listening to Major LeFleur direct and coordinate the action. LeFleur used plain old telephone—POTS—voice communication over hard-wired landline communicators because satellite communication wasn’t possible within the tunnels. There were hundreds of feet of plastic-coated copper wire running from LeFleur’s tent all the way into the caves. Should any of the assault teams need to leave the tunnels, they would use the GNU radio connection to inform LeFleur landlines were no longer functional. Both the landlines and the GNU radio communications were secure lines.

Team One, commanded by Captain LeRoy O’Malley, entered the southeast-most cave and found nothing for the first two hundred feet. Then one of their forward point men saw movement and O’Malley paused to communicate with LeFleur. The Major told him, “Hold position and ready your sniper.”

Their sniper, Corporal Charles Isley, a stocky, quiet man from the deep South, looked through the night scope and whispered to O’Malley, “No dice, Captain, no clear shot, and there’s three more coming who could see my work before I eat ’em.”

Cassie heard the voice of Captain O’Malley, reporting in to Major LeFleur in a whisper. O’Malley said, “Too late for sniping. Gonna put ’em to sleep with gas. Okay with you, sir?”

The Major confirmed permission. As O’Malley moved his hand toward his self-contained breathing apparatus, the soldiers all donned their own masks, and the explosives expert turned a switch. In response, a powerful but quiet battery-operated fan began blowing gas toward the chatting hostiles.

Team Two entered their cave 200 feet west of Team One’s entry point. This entrance was twelve feet down a steep slope from Team One. The team had just completed establishment of their cover point when they heard footsteps coming toward them. “Team Two, Captain Cassavilla, we’re about to have contact. Sniper indicates no love. Should we follow alternate plan?”

Twenty feet in front of LeFleur’s tent, Cassie shouted “Yes!” over the

land line.

Major LeFleur's face showed his annoyance. "There can be only one person running an operation." Didn't she know that? He responded, "Oui."

Cassie paced in circles, her eyes facing the cave entrances.

Cassavilla made a switching motion with his empty hand and pulled on his self-contained breathing mask with his other hand. All his team members followed suit with their masks. The explosives expert turned on a small canister with a fan attached to its nozzle. The thin, almost gray cloud dispersed, blown into the cave. As the hostiles closed the distance they staggered, stumbled, and fell.

Team One's attackers advanced and broke the necks of their enemies' unconscious bodies using simple hardware store hammers. When both sides in a battle were armies without countries, no rules of engagement and no Geneva Convention applied. The only objective for the mercenaries was to minimize their own casualties as they obliterated their enemies.

Team Three had begun using gas as well. So far, Cassie counted thirty-seven of the Houmaz camp dead and almost 15 percent of the total length of all tunnels cleared by all her teams.

She could see no one outside the caves during this, the hottest part of the day. Cassie assumed no one knew her mercs were there yet. She'd overheard all the teams talking on the radio, and watched the video reported from the helmet cams on LeFleur's computer monitor. Sooner or later, they might reach a cavern with a ceiling too high for the gas to be effective. Then the hostiles would notice them and all hell would break loose.

The infrared satellite photos had identified a total of about seven hundred warm bodies in the camp as of three days ago, making the body count so far about 5 percent of their total goal.

Cassie heard gunfire at last from inside Team Five's cave. Over the minutes the gunfire intensified. Since her teams used their ammo only where a fatal hit was at least 75 percent probable, most of the gunfire—automatic weapons fire—came from the hostiles. From the sound she suspected they used AK-74's in place of the old standby AK-47 and ancient Kalashnikov machine pistols. Someone had spent a great deal of money and had powerful connections to arm them. Cassie figured they were bought from the Russian mafiya and shipped south through Tajikistan.

Her body was tense and rigid inside the Kevlar suit. The heat of the

day made the fabric slick against her sweaty skin but she hardly noticed. The voice in her head cried bitterly about what she imagined must be happening to the men fighting for her.

A loud pop followed by a small avalanche closed one of the exit tunnels. Cassie feared the explosion might have hurt or killed some of her own soldiers, and shook herself. But it would be the hostiles that died, wouldn't it? Some rats trying to leave their sinking ship.

\* \* \*

“Status?” begged Lee.

“They are about two-thirds of the way to the ends of the caves. The hostiles tripped the explosives on six of the seven alternate cave exits, and explosive in each blast closed those exits forever. So far, two-hundred-sixty-nine hostiles have been rendered, and we've called for their surrender in Arabic, Pashto, and Dari.” Shimmel shrugged, looking at his watch. “No reply. They'll get two more minutes before we stop using sleeping gas and begin using nerve gas.”

“What if they decide to surrender?”

Shimmel laughed. “You, my friend, are very naïve. If they do surrender, we'll kill them anyway.”

Lee's jaw dropped. “That's outright murder.”

Shimmel shrugged his shoulders. “They're terrorists! If we can convince them to surrender, we'll recover any weapons we think might have value before we close all the cave entrances. Surrender will take less time for us, and time is critical. With Drapoff holding the communications in Riyadh at blackout, our biggest exposures to danger is that someone in Riyadh becomes suspicious before we mount the second attack. Communications failures in Riyadh happen sometimes so we can get away with it up to half a day, but no more. We don't want telephone company repair teams in Riyadh to discover the problem is external to their systems.”

Lee had never been in combat, and he tried to understand. He felt deeply disturbed and found himself wringing his hands. He wondered, weren't the Muslim extremists still human? Were they beyond redemption? And what about him and Cassie, and their mercenaries? Was there a difference between attack in combat and murder? For the first time since

they'd spent their first night together at the Mandarin Oriental, Lee doubted Cassie and her plans for vengeance.

\* \* \*

Agha Hassan Raman was proud that his brother, Sultan Raman, had been selected by Pesi Houmaz to be one of the mujahidin on an important mission. His brother told him nothing, except that it was critical. The teen looked up as the noise of footsteps filtered down the cave. The muted sounds of far-off explosions sang into the air. Explosions were common enough here, where the training exercises were a constant nighttime activity, but this was daytime.

Agha Hassan practiced putting on and taking off the bomb vest he'd someday wear as a suicide bomber. He fiddled with the C-4 vest under civilian clothing. He could put on the vest and arm it in less than thirty seconds. Raman held the vest in his hands with the triggering switch set to "off" when scuffling sounds and whispering came toward him from the cave's entrance and grew louder. He stood before the cave's heart, a large cavern where the Muslim extremists held their inventory of high explosives. Raman donned the vest and armed the trigger switch. He yelled over his shoulder to one of the others, "Salomon, tell the others we're under attack. Hurry!"

He faced the incoming strangers. Raman held his hands upward and clasped them together on top of his head, the universal gesture of surrender, with the device's switch clasped in the palm of one of his hands. He walked toward the soldiers he heard in the tunnel. He spoke loud in Pashto. He walked closer. He would certainly kill his comrades by igniting the vault.

Nearby were over 200 pounds of C-4 and twenty surface-to-air missiles, as well as other munitions. Those weapons were valuable and it was unfortunate to waste them. But this was the fate Allah had left to him. This would be his only opportunity to kill infidels.

Two gray-clad men in body armor emerged from the dark sides of the tunnel, each armed to the teeth and shouting in a language he didn't understand. Raman looked over his shoulder and saw he stood too close to the cavern dome. But, as they closed the distance to him, he knew they'd soon see the explosives in his vest.

Raman mumbled a brief silent prayer. He took a deep breath, ready to squeeze the button.

Two mercenaries shouted in Arabic at the Muslim extremist. For a second everything stopped. One of the mercs pointed to the vest containing the C-4. But it was too late. Shrapnel blew Raman's skull apart, sending a stream of his brain tissue out in a storm along with the full destructive power of the bomb. Pieces of his dismembered body splashed out at over a thousand miles per hour.

Massive amounts of shrapnel from the nine-inch nails and bolts in the vest bomb exploded into the arsenal. The secondary explosion from the weapons stored there caused the cavern to collapse, dropping the mountain on the spot where Raman had stood. Rocks tumbled down, closing the cave behind the entry point of Team Six. Two of Cassie's mercenaries were crushed flat, never having a moment to realize their lives were ending. Four of her mercs were mortally wounded but still alive when the cavern in front of them blew up. The four remaining members of Team Six were wounded and trapped as the cave closed both before and behind them.

The roar shook the entire mountain.

\* \* \*

"What the fuck was that?" Cassie pointed to the dust cloud rising off the peak. She watched from outside LeFleur's command tent and looked through binoculars just in time to see the entire mountain rise and fall back on itself, followed by a funnel of dust pouring from Team Six's tunnel entrance. "Get LeFleur on the GNU radio," she said to JD. He dialed a number into her cell phone and handed a headset to her. "Major, what happened? Have you heard anything from Team Six?"

"No, Mademoiselle Cassie. Their line is dead. I believe Team Six may have fired a shot into the armory and exploded the entire cave." His voice expressed anger and dismay at this turn of events.

She pushed into LeFleur's tent, her hips rigid as she ran, making her state of panic obvious. Her worst fears had been realized, her emotions already in overdrive. She was now responsible for up to ten deaths; these men had died serving her. Some among her army would die, but her heart sank anyway. *Please, make it not true.*

“Send someone in there to find out!” She glared at LeFleur. “That’s ten lives.”

His eyes raged back at her. “Send who? There’s only myself here, Mademoiselle, and I’m busy trying to coordinate all aspects of the attack.”

Cassie faced JD and Ari. “Both of you, come with me.” She pointed over her shoulder toward Shimon and Lester, as she sprinted toward the smoking cave. “You two monitor LeFleur and tell me everything he says.” JD and Ari faced each other and privately shrugged, trotting behind her.

As she’d been shown by Adam Mahee, she began stringing out a landline as they ran. They neared the entry point. “Masks on,” she yelled, as the three of them entered the tunnel. They peered through the built-in night scopes in their helmet heads-up displays. The display showed heat sources everywhere, smoldering debris. They moved slowly into the tunnel, taking care not to trigger booby traps.

After two hundred feet, they found a solid wall of boulders blocking their path. They tried in futile desperation to move the boulders. Cassie spoke into her helmet microphone, transmitting over the landline trolling behind them, “Lester, Shimon?”

Shimon answered, “I’m here. Cassie, what’s the status?”

“Looks like a solid wall of rock with no way through. After the attack is complete the mercs can enter again in strength to dig them out, but it looks like LeFleur was right. They may all be lost if the tunnel caved.” She tried to keep tears from clouding her vision, choking her voice. She took a deep breath. *I must do this. Be brave.*

“Cassie, get yourself, JD, and Ari back here. It’s not safe in there, and we need you alive to pay the bills.”

Stunned, she laughed awkwardly. “Returning now.” She ignored the wailing voice in the back of her head as it screamed her guilt for all the death. The three walked back in silence. Cassie, lost and alone, felt bereft, realizing the real cost of lives lost so far.

Halfway to the tunnel exit, Ari held up his arm. “Shh. I hear the footsteps.” Bullets flew at them from directly ahead. One of the shells hit just above Ari’s head, sending a rain of rock splinters cascading down into his face. “Shit. Can’t see. Blind from the dust.”

JD tackled Ari to the ground. Cassie dropped flat, crawling with them to cover behind a large rock near the wall created by the explosion they had

come to investigate. “Where’d they come from?” she wondered aloud. She hit the Talk button on the land line. “Major LeFleur, we’re under attack. Can you tell us what’s happened? And please send us assistance ASAP!”

“Mademoiselle Cassie, Team Four was overrun. Everyone in that tunnel was lost. From the sounds I suspect the enemy used a grenade gun to blow the team apart. No radio contact. Probably no survivors. Then the hostiles entered tunnel six where you are. I can send Team Two but it will take time for them to reach you.”

Cassie counted the origin points of the bullets. At least seven. She motioned to JD. “Get Ari and you out of the center of the path. Move quickly to the side of the cave. Major LeFleur said they have a grenade launcher”

Before she could finish a bright bolt of light spouted in front of them, followed immediately by an explosion at the wall behind them. They moved fast, settling behind another boulder further from the wall. They sat, waiting for the inevitable. If a grenade hit near them, it would be all over.

Another loud pop, followed by a bright explosion further back against the wall. Rock shreds sprayed over them.

“That was too close,” said Ari. He rubbed his eyes. “I can see now.” He set his Ruger Mini-14 for single shot, aimed, and pulled the trigger. They heard a human wail of pain. “One down, six to go.”

More shots came from a long way down the tunnel. The hostiles were surrounded. “They’ll be more desperate now,” said JD. “Ari, take the right side. Cassie, come with me.” JD positioned her behind a large rock. “Stay here. Do not move. Understand? Go nowhere.” He placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed her to the ground. “We’ll take care of this. No matter what, you must live!”

“Okay.” She held the screeching voice in her head at bay and nodded. “I’ll behave.” JD and Ari looked at each other, their expressions indicating they weren’t convinced. Firing their Mini-14’s, they moved carefully forward, toward the tunnel exit.

Far away on the other side, she heard the mercs’ guns roar, as the hostiles fired back at attackers who rushed at them from both directions.

One more grenade passed over JD and Ari, headed directly for the spot where she hid. The explosion brought a wall of rock and dirt down on her. JD and Ari turned back and ran to her. JD lifted a large rock from the dirt



covering her body. “My God, she’s buried.” They both dug with their hands, rapidly sweeping away the debris.

Less than twenty feet away, the skirmish raged between the mercs and the hostiles.

Ari cleared the dirt from her face. “She’s breathing.” He gripped both hands on her shoulders and gently lifted her head. “Cassie, can you hear me?”

Cassie coughed out some dust. “Raughh?” She tried again. “What happened?”

“Never mind,” said JD. “Can you move?”

She nodded, and rose unsteadily to her feet. “My chest hurts.”

Ari ran his fingers over her ribs.

“Ouch! There may be one or two broken.”

He patted her arms and shook his head. “No serious damage. Can you walk?”

She nodded hesitantly and Ari offered his arm. “Let’s move our asses out of here.” The shooting had stopped. He reached into Cassie’s combat jacket and pulled out the land line receiver. “Major LeFleur, this is Ari. Thanks for the help. What’s our status? Have all the hostiles in tunnel six been rendered?”

“Oui.”

Ari said, “We go now.”

She looked around. “Okay. I’m okay now. Don’t need help.” But she stumbled and Ari caught her. She took a deep breath, gathering herself. She waved her bodyguards off, then took a step.

She could hear the buzzing of flies grow to a chorus as they passed the bodies of dead and wounded hostiles. The mercs were systematically executing any they found alive. She could smell the stench of death as they passed. She needed to vomit but her ribs hurt too much.

They exited tunnel six into the bright daylight.

She wondered how many more of her men would die. She wanted this over as soon as possible and called LeFleur on the GNU radio. “Major, is it possible to use nerve gas to kill them all?”

“Probably not. I’d assume the innermost point in each tunnel is a cavern with their living quarters. If the cavern ceilings are higher than those in the tunnels, then the gas would float up and disperse.”

“What choices do we have to limit our casualties?”

LeFleur replied, “The only choice limiting casualties is to close all of the tunnel entrances with high explosives.”

“Then do it. Get all our people out now. We’ll use their own trick to end them and this. Either the explosives will kill them all or they’ll be trapped within the caves until their food and water run out. Okay?”

“Oui, Mademoiselle Cassie.” She could detect the disappointment in his voice.

\* \* \*

LeFleur felt contempt for the woman but tried to hide it. Shimmel had told him that she was his client and was the final arbiter of mission rules. But on this choice, he agreed. He shouted into the helmet microphone. “Put the fuses for the explosives on a fifteen-minute delay.” He had counted on recovering the contents of their armories; the value of those weapons on the open market could have made him and his men rich. He cursed fate for this defeat.

Twelve minutes later, LeFleur assembled all the remaining team members, forty-seven of the original seventy, behind natural cover, waiting and watching as the mountain convulsed and shuddered.

\* \* \*

As Cassie watched the demolition, a thrill ran through her at the deaths of 700 humans. She found she bore no guilt over what she’d done. She thought, *they are evil; they deserve death*. An idiot’s grin decorated her face. She turned away from those who might see her. *Is this what success in battle looks like? I’m hating myself!*

The entire merc force entered tunnel six and tried without success to move boulders sealing the team’s catacomb. Where the deaths of the terrorists gave her a thrill, she felt a heavy weight of guilt for the deaths of her mercs. Standing in the tunnel, she said a silent prayer for the souls of her soldiers, then cursed the souls of the fundamentalists they had killed before they died.

She called Shimmel and Lee on the GNU radio. “We’re done here, and casualties were twenty-three dead. We lost ten of those men in an explosion

which closed a tunnel. Stop jamming Afghanistan and tell Major McTavish I'm on my way to him with JD, Ari, Lester, and Shimon. Cassie out.”

Cassie left LeFleur and his men to complete their work. She asked Major LeFleur, “Please try again to remove the boulders sealing tunnel six.”

Thinking more about the weapons they could recover than the bodies of his dead men, LeFleur was happy to agree.

She and her Mossad bodyguards took the Land Rover to Jalalabad's airport for the next phase of their operation. The drive took most of the day. The longer they drove, the more morose Cassie became, thinking about the death she'd wrought on her own men.

They left the vehicle at the private terminal where the Lear was waiting. As they climbed the steps into the jet, she realized this would be her first visit to Riyadh since the night she was raped by the assassin. She shivered as memories of being raped, fighting for her life, and fleeing while chased by a security team all flooded unbidden into her mind. But it was too late for second thoughts. *Steady, girl. This is the only path open to me now.* Still, her stomach burned, overflowing with acid.

Her mercenary force had found no evidence that either Tariq or Pesi had been in the caves, but she assumed one of them, probably Tariq, was there running the camp when her mercs blew out the tunnels. If she was correct, Tariq was dead and Pesi remained, waiting alone for her in Riyadh.

She began an assassination meditation sequence the agency taught, visualizing Pesi Houmaz in front of her, a surprised look on his face, blood dripping from a tiny bullet hole just above his eyebrows.

## CHAPTER 34

*September 5, 9:21 p.m.*

*Toronto Wharf, Toronto, Canada*

The ship's crane hoisted another shipping container about fifty feet off the freighter's deck and gently dropped it on the dock. Hidden inside this one were three dead bodies, including one of Raman's wounded who'd died enroute, and a delivery truck. Sultan Raman had wanted to toss the dead into the ocean, but it would have been too dangerous to open the container. He braced himself against the fender. The truck contained the parts of one unassembled weapon minus its payload.

He could hear English-speaking voices outside, coordinating the unloading of the freighter. Pesi Houmaz informed him the dock crews would unload the freighter and then quit for the night, leaving the dock unmanned until morning. He'd wait until 12:30 a.m. and then get his team—those alive and the bodies of both his dead and the ship's crew they had murdered—into the truck. Before they left the pier in the truck, they'd dump the dead—weighted with trash from the container—into Lake Ontario. And then they'd drive to the US border crossing at Toronto.

He told himself, *almost there*.

Raman took a deep breath and prayed nothing would go wrong at the border.

Hours passed. The men made no noise, anticipating they wouldn't survive another discovery. Just after 12:30 a.m., Raman opened the container door and started the truck's engine. In less than ten minutes, they drove off the pier and into Toronto's streets.

\* \* \*

Hazret Ali, the local warlord for the Eastern Shura region of Afghanistan,

spoke in Pashto to his local mullah, Maukvi Muhammed Khalis. “Sire, please let me destroy them now. They stole our money. By Islamic law, we’re required to cut off their hands, at the very least.”

The mullah who commanded Ali refused, shaking his head. “No. Absolutely not. I believe these strangers did your work for you.” He looked south into the sky, at a dark cloud of smoke from Major LeFleur’s embattled hills. “First you must ask them who they are and if they’re here to kill the mountain insurgents or help them.”

Filled with reluctance, Ali mounted his horse and took the white flag from his saddlebag, mounting it on his sword. “I’ll find out. The money they took is food from our children. Come with me if you want, but I don’t believe you’ll be safe, even in my company.

Khalis smiled in reply as he mounted his horse. The two rode down the hillside toward Major LeFleur’s command tent.

\* \* \*

LeFleur watched them approach and read the printed instructions he’d been given by Cassie in the event of contact from the warlords. He was ready for them long before they arrived in the camp. If she was correct, these men would lead him to the remaining Houmaz Muslim extremists, and possibly to a greater understanding of any other plans they had.

“Salaam,” said LeFleur in Pashto. “Welcome to our camp.”

“Are you Americans?” asked Khalis.

“No. We are mercenaries. A few come from America but most are from other countries. I am French.” He tried to appear to be as humble as possible.

Even from so far away, all could hear the buzzing of flies feeding on the dead as the sun moved behind the valley hills. Khalis looked toward the smoky caves, satisfied. “May we speak with you within the hospitality of your tent?” he asked with deference to Ali’s disdain.

LeFleur motioned with his arm for them to dismount and enter. “Please let my men care for your horses.” The three men went inside and sat in three of the six campaign chairs inside the tent. “How can I help you?”

“We are curious. This is our valley and you are strangers. Why are you here, mercenary?” Ali’s expression was granite hard.

LeFleur sat between them at the portable campaign table covered by a map of the mountain region. From inside the tent the buzzing insects were less obtrusive. He pointed toward the caves. “The men there stole money from us and murdered twenty-three of my men when we came to get back what they took.”

Ali’s expression softened and he looked at Khalis. Khalis smiled at both men. “How much money did they steal from you?”

LeFleur said, “Many millions of dollars.”

Khalis smiled again. He pointed in the general direction of the smoking caves. “Have they have met their doom? Is your honor debt satisfied?”

“Maybe,” said LeFleur. He thought of the script he’d memorized. So far, it had worked, down to the word without any deviation. He tried to keep the surprise from his face. “But I’m not sure we have dealt with all of them. There may be some who escaped or weren’t in the caves when we attacked. Is there another place, perhaps a house nearby, where they go for supplies or to meet?”

Ali realized his own soldiers might not need to kill anyone or risk any danger—these mercenaries were so eager to die. It appealed to him as a leader to avoid risking his own men. “They have a compound in the village of Upper Pachir. Do you know this place?”

Here was the first deviation from the script. LeFleur said, “Yes, on our way to these caves we drove on the road bordering the village. But I don’t remember any large house.”

Ali smiled now, for the first time. “It is not on the road. It lies down a side street and up a hill, well hidden. Let me give you directions.”

\* \* \*

Just after nightfall, Major LeFleur’s mercs left their trucks on a street several blocks away with two mercs as guards. One of Cassie’s mercs, a short, stout German woman named Ina Boric, stood silent, swatting at mosquitoes. The sky was clear and the moon lit the men as they approached their target. They made no noise surrounding the large residence. The air cooled very fast after sunset, from boiling hot to frigid.

An officer named Casselton placed several snipers into positions atop

nearby buildings where they used their silenced sniper rifles to kill the compound's six guards. LeFleur's men swarmed the remaining hostiles, getting close enough to kill twenty-one more of them before they could respond. His group suffered no losses.

When they breached the front door, they found four unarmed men alive inside the residence. These appeared to be unaccustomed to fighting. One spoke Arabic, proclaiming himself their banker. LeFleur decided to use him as the example for the others. "Banker, what do you do for Houmaz? What are their plans?"

"Houmaz? What is Houmaz?" The banker's expression was arrogant, one arm gripped over the large hole in his forearm made by a Ruger's spinning bullet. "I demand you release us!"

Dushov had given LeFleur a syringe and a vial of "truth serum" before they left California, for use with any survivors. But the small container had broken during the battle at the caves and, besides, his alternate plan would be more to his liking. Before their attack at the compound, LeFleur discussed the interrogation with his soldiers and requested volunteers. Each of the seven men with him knew what to expect. Two soldiers held the banker rigid while one man forced his non-wounded hand onto the conference table in the large room.

LeFleur's voice was very soft as he spoke, so all the captives had to strain to hear his words. "You stole money from us and the punishment is loss of a hand. But you took so much, we discussed it with your mullah, Maukvi Muhammed Khalis. He said we could take both hands from each of you. Unfortunately, we have no surgeon."

The banker smiled. "No surgeon? Will I keep my hands?"

LeFleur signaled the fourth soldier who raised a metal hammer and smashed the small finger of the banker's left hand before the banker could see it coming. He smashed the thumb. Then the index finger. Next the ring finger. And then the middle finger. Each time, the man screamed, more in shock than in pain. But he said nothing.

LeFleur asked, "Tell me about your plans, banker. My orders are to do whatever it takes to find out." Then LeFleur's soldier removed a hunting knife from his waistband and held it so the banker could see it. "And don't lie or he will cut out your tongue. If he does, we'll let you choke to death on your own blood while we simply move on to the next prisoner."

The banker gulped but said nothing. LeFleur motioned to the soldier who held the knife. "Remove his hand, please, corporal." So fast it all happened in a blur, the corporal neatly severed the banker's hand and held it up for the others to see. The banker howled and LeFleur yelled "Silence!" The corporal slapped the banker across the face. "Again. What are your plans?" As he waited, the corporal placed the flattened flesh which had been the banker's hand onto the table and rolled all of the fingers in the severed hand like a piece of dough.

The banker's tongue moved in terror but no words came from him. Then he refocused. "I don't know! Please, leave me alone."

LeFleur motioned to the corporal once again for the blade, using a slicing motion. "He is of no use to us. Take his tongue. We'll move on to another to find out what we want to know."

The banker screamed but didn't say anything more, and the corporal slowly but expertly carved the man's tongue from his head. He held the bloody tongue up for the other captives to see while the banker choked to death. Almost immediately, the room was buzzing with flies, crowding around the mouth of the fresh corpse.

LeFleur looked at the remaining Muslim extremists. "One of you will talk. Whoever does will go free. We will torture all the rest of you to death. It troubles me your banker didn't understand. Think of yourselves as our toys, our entertainment. Do any of you wish to live?"

One of the captives began babbling, speaking in Pashto faster than any of the mercenaries could understand. LeFleur smiled and placed his arm around the man's shoulder. "Please, my friend. Speak slowly. Tell me Houmaz's plans. Then tell me about their Riyadh safe house." LeFleur listened with a rapt expression on his face for almost an hour. He recorded all of it using the videocam on the corporal's helmet. They vetted the story using torture on the remaining Muslim extremists.

And then, without regret, LeFleur executed each of the Muslim extremists with a head shot.

\* \* \*

The truck rumbled along the highway just north of the Canadian border. Raman drove and the remaining five terrorists sat hidden in the back of the



truck. The side panels of the vehicle proclaimed “www.FrenchGourmetCuisine.com—the finest food on earth.” As they approached the border crossing, Raman rehearsed the words he’d use if questioned by the border patrol. He expected no challenge, since northern border operations of the United States were underfunded despite all the terrorism engulfing the world. Pesi Houmaz had prepared him with a plausible script in the event he was challenged.

The uniformed woman motioned for Raman to roll down his window. When he complied, she asked, “Whatcha got in the truck, eh?”

“Escargot. Snails. Two thousand cans of snails.”

She laughed and waved him through.

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## CHAPTER 35

*August 29, 4:18 p.m.  
Houmaz family estate,  
east outskirts of Riyadh,  
Saudi Arabia*

Tariq Houmaz had traveled from the caves well before dawn. The trip had taken an entire day. On his way from his mountain region training center, he'd noticed the tribal lords seemed absent, but wrote it off due to the early hour and darkness obscuring his vision.

He'd flown from the airport in Jalalabad on the family jet. Tariq had arrived at King Khalid International Airport near Al Bawathi two hours earlier. He was met with several bodyguards and a limo, taking him the final twenty miles over desert roads to the walled compound serving as their operations headquarters in the Al Madinah Sina Iyah area of Ar Riyadh, just off highway 513.

He dragged a hand over his forehead to wipe some of the sweat dripping from him, exhausted from his long trip.

It was well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit. By the time he'd walked from the air-conditioned limo through the family compound's courtyard to the hallway, dust coated him. Sitting in the conference room, the mint tea—which his brother knew was his favorite—couldn't settle him into their task. He realized Pesi recognized this. Pesi had called this meeting to discuss the planned attack they'd worked to organize. Tariq was still frustrated and angry about their failure—Pesi's failure—to collect Sashakovich and Ainsley. He still didn't know what she knew. But they were out of time and now they'd have to act recklessly.

In the dimming rays of a violet sunset, Pesi and Tariq Houmaz sat in the well-equipped conference room of the family estate.

Tariq found his thoughts unfocused, drifting. He suddenly realized Pesi was speaking.

“The pieces of the three bombs have arrived at our safe house in Trenton, New Jersey. One bomb came in pieces from twelve different airports. One came overland through both Canada and Mexico in pieces in different trucks. The third came from a series of United States military air transports, without their knowledge.”

Pesi paused, his eyes focused on his brother’s face. He coughed, attracting Tariq’s attention, and then continued. “The fissionable material will be obtained from within the United States in a few days, using our double at the agency. Our operatives picked up his wife and his son earlier today, ensuring his cooperation. We have them at the General Lewis Inn in Lewisburg, West Virginia. We have a team there in a cabin suite. It’s very remote and no one will discover them there. Sultan Raman is the project manager and he has four men with him. Two died en route. But the four remaining men are adequate to complete the job.”

Pesi looked at his brother as if he was waiting for approval. None came. Tariq’s eyelids drooped. Pesi gulped and looked back at his notes. “The cell we established in New Jersey is where the most highly skilled of our people are.” He pressed a key on the remote and the next Powerpoint slide popped on the screen. “They all have advanced degrees in relevant areas. All worked in Northern California for Silicon Valley electronics firms until America’s personal computer industry moved to India. They will assemble the bomb parts for transport to Lewisburg for final assembly with the warhead matériel.”

He showed another slide with the assembly packing list and set-up instructions. Pesi concluded, “The entire operation should be complete within four days. Not only will the President be in Washington, but also he will be meeting at the White House with the head of the Israeli government.” Pesi beamed at this last statement, pointing to a slide projected off his computer’s hard drive. The map on the projection screen showed two red arrows, one entering the United States near Toronto, one entering the United States close to Tucson, Arizona, and a set of olive-colored arrows coming through Seattle, Washington, Miami, Florida, and Washington, DC.

Pesi concluded, “So it appears that the Sashakovich woman either

knew nothing or has chosen not to reveal anything to those who cast her out.”

Tariq realized his younger brother had finally done something right. The American spy wouldn't be needed.

Tariq asked questions about the timing of subsequent events but Pesi preferred to dwell on his successes to date, as if begging for praise from his brother.

Tariq remained silent, not yet ready to congratulate Pesi. So much could still go wrong. He tried to quash his impatience.

Pesi shrugged his shoulders. “Let's break for a while. You look tired from your travels. I'll have a light meal brought to your room. We can resume tomorrow morning.”

\* \* \*

Just two hours after dawn the next day, thirty men sat perspiring in a hot, brightly lit cavernous warehouse five miles north of Riyadh. Even with portable generators powering the air conditioners, the day outside was so very hot that they provided little relief. The mercs cooked while they awaited orders from Major McTavish.

Although a Brit, Alister McTavish had once been on loan, serving as a lieutenant colonel, to US Special Forces. He'd been one bar short of being promoted to a full bird when a series of budget cuts ten years ago kept him from promotion, and he retired.

He'd been brilliant at one thing: battle tactics and operational execution. He'd drifted for a while, eventually becoming a mercenary to employ the only skill he'd practiced since graduation from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, twenty-five years ago.

McTavish held the GNU radio and cell phone in his left hand and listened.

“Major, this is Cassie. We've just landed. Should be at your location in less than ninety minutes. How many armed unfriendlies are there at the compound?”

“From Major LeFleur's video, we estimate fifty,” McTavish growled back, a slight Scottish twang coloring his speech.

“What's your status at this time?”

“We’re ready to move out when you arrive. Since the compound is in a remote area, far from the city’s center, we don’t anticipate anyone seeing or hearing the operation. Even if they did, normal telephones and cell phones will be nonfunctional during the blackout. We expect to complete our work without interruption from the police or military.”

“What’s the plan to breach the facility?”

“We found the gardeners Houmaz uses to keep the landscape pretty. Got them tied up, so to speak. Four of my men speak Arabic. They’re in the gardeners’ uniforms. I’ve got them, plus eleven more ready to hide in the back of the gardeners’ truck. Today is garbage day, and the Saudis employ Palestinians to do their garbage pick-up. We stopped a garbage truck and have the rest of my men in the back of the truck. Fortunately for us, it was the start of the day so there’s no refuse smelling up the truck. We’ve been monitoring all radio broadcasts around the city and, so far, no one’s noticed the missing trucks.”

“I don’t want my presence, complete with my bodyguards, to impact the coming operation, so we’ll go with the garbage.”

\* \* \*

As their rental car sped over the dusty road to the warehouse, Cassie watched the MPEG movies of the torture interrogations sent with LeFleur’s email. She now had a roughly sketched map of the compound, listing room by room how each was used. Major McTavish also had a copy of LeFleur’s email so he could ready his men for their assault.

It was as if there were two separate people inside her. Watching the torture movies LeFleur made had disgusted her. But she also felt alarm—the actual torture left her licking her lips as she watched the video. The voice in her head demanded retribution, and she realized she was at the brink of a breakdown. She resisted as best she could. Weren’t those LeFleur had tortured also human? What had gone so wrong to make them this way? And now, trying to see the difference between them and what she was becoming, she was sickened to the point of nausea. Realizing her state, she shook her head to clear it. She whispered, “What’s become of me? Before Riyadh a few months ago, I was a normal woman. But no normal person could feel this way.”

The content of the movies would alter her plans for Pesi Houmaz. There would be no head shot to kill him. If there was any chance the Houmaz brothers planned an operation on US soil, then she had to keep him alive to find out what he knew and let US authorities know. Even though her own country had showed her no compassion, didn't help her in her time of need, she didn't want innocent people to die. On her last trip to Riyadh, she'd been a patriot, and the United States was still her country.

To accommodate her change in plans, she'd visited a hardware store and acquired other tools while they were leaving the airport in Riyadh. Her new plan both revolted and excited her. She'd discussed the change in tactics with her four bodyguards. They had no remorse about what she requested. The special items were carried by Lester, a master at interrogation.

\* \* \*

The gardening truck led the way, with the garbage truck trailing two hundred feet behind. Both traveled at thirty miles per hour. In the back of the garbage truck with almost twenty ripe, sweating men and women, Cassie found herself more comfortable with female mercenaries around her, most built like Judy Hernandez. Less casual than the men, they responded to Cassie's presence with nodding heads. Cassie smiled in return. Even better, they were well prepared, disciplined, and highly skilled. She watched them prepare their weapons, load clips of ammo into them, and talk about the tactics and operations they expected to use in the upcoming battle.

The women systematically checked each other's body armor and prepared their minds for the havoc of an operation. She counted eight women, all taller and much heavier than her.

All wary, yet each behaved as if this was just another day.

For Cassie, this was the only day.

They drove for an hour through a dust storm, winds blowing sand into the back of the garbage truck. It choked every soldier despite the dust masks covering their faces. It blinded them. They rubbed their eyes, further compromising their ability to see. As they approached the compound, the garbage truck slowed to a crawl and the gardeners' van sped toward the compound's gates.

At the entry gate, two guards emerged from a small brick structure and motioned for the van to stop. Captain Halid Sambol, an olive-skinned merc from Jakarta, spoke Arabic. He sat in the driver's seat, rolled down the side window, and waited for the guards.

A guard leaned in through the window and asked, "Where's Omar?"

Sambol replied, "He's sick today. Or maybe he's just lazy." He laughed. "I'm Achmad and this is Abdul. We're here this time only, provided Omar sees fit to show up next time."

There was a long silence. The guard turned and spoke to the other guard. The other nodded and reached up, pressing a button at the top of the guard hut's roof. The compound's gate opened. Sambol looked across to Lieutenant Henry Harrington in the passenger's seat. "That worked like a charm. Everybody ready to roll?" Harrington nodded. Sambol drove the van across the gateway, stopping before they had cleared into the compound's large paved atrium. "Signal the garbage truck, Henry. On my mark, everyone out. *Now! Go, go, go!*"

\* \* \*

A guard entered the conference room and handed Tariq a message stating, "Satellite communications between Riyadh and the Afghanistan training grounds are now working. But we failed to raise the mountain outpost."

Tariq asked the guard, "When did you receive this message?"

The guard said, "Just now. We've been trying to raise them for about an hour."

Tariq's brow creased with concern. "Why weren't we told?"

Pesi laughed and said, "In the previous week similar communications problems have occurred twice for brief periods. It's probably nothing." He rubbed his eyes. "I need a break." He walked off and closed the door to the bathroom, leaving Tariq alone, seated at the conference table.

\* \* \*

Five armed soldiers cleared from the van in seconds. They used customized silencers on their Ruger Mini-14s to quietly kill twenty-six guards before any could utter a cry of alarm. The pops from the silenced guns weren't noticed by the guards until it was too late.

Seconds after the van emptied, the garbage truck plowed through the open gate and slammed into the guards' gatehouse, crushing it, flattening the two guards inside. Twenty-five mercenaries emptied from the garbage truck just inside the concrete walls of the compound. Cassie and her four bodyguards popped out with the mercs. By the time their feet hit the sand, the battle raged.

A pitched skirmish ensued between the mercs and several guards who found themselves confused and surprised. Most of the hostiles had only knives—they hadn't expected something like this. When they tried to shout to their peers, the mercs cut them down before they could raise an alarm. Cassie saw one of the mercs, a young woman, fall onto the dust, bleeding from a wound to her gut from a thrown knife that somehow missed her Kevlar vest. As Cassie ran, her own gut roiled, as if in sympathy with the pain the merc felt. The voice in her head screeched, telling her what to do, where to look. She followed its instructions. *On your left!* She swiveled, raising her Ruger, and without willing it, the gun fired and took down one of the Houmaz guards. *Now, behind you!* She dove to the ground and fired back, barely evading and killing another guard. The voice saved her life as she ran, weaving her way toward the compound's main building, followed by her bodyguards who tried to catch up with her.

The mercenaries punched forward to the living quarters on the east side of the building. The guards held the conference center's exterior on the west side, moving forward toward its entrance in the building's middle. Major McTavish motioned for a team of ten to outflank them on the west side. Cassie watched the maneuver in progress and moved toward the center of the building near the front door. JD, Lester, Shimon, and Ari ran and caught up, forming a human shield around her.

A lone group of guards on the building's left side—fewer than ten but she wasn't sure of their exact number—fired at her and her bodyguards. Lester tackled Cassie, throwing her to the ground behind a short wall, out of the line of fire. Her other three bodyguards bunched low around her, dragging Cassie further into cover, under a cloistered roof overhang.

She could see the front door, twenty feet away, her objective. The compound's guards, all dressed in gray outfits, had managed to retrieve automatic handguns. Armed and trained, now they were a formidable force.

Lester called McTavish on the GNU radio. "Alister, we're pinned east



of the conference room door. Please send help.”

Seconds later, mercs lobbed a cluster of hand grenades into the guards. The hostiles panicked, shouting instructions in Arabic to each other, too far away for Cassie to hear over the grinding sound of the battle. As they flew away from the grenades, it made them easy targets for the waiting mercs.

Cassie and her bodyguards sprinted toward the door of the compound’s conference center, where she believed Pesi Houmaz waited. The shooting was less sporadic now as the battle wound down.

LeFleur had told them the conference center was soundproofed.

Just before she and her bodyguards entered, she ordered them to follow very close behind her so the door to the outside would be open for the briefest possible time. They entered without making noise and Ari relatched the door silently. As it closed, sounds of the diminishing battle vanished.

Her entire life had been ruined by the Houmaz family. Cassie licked her lips, as if she was dying of thirst in the desert and had found a well. She wanted Pesi Houmaz dead so much she could taste it. But first, she’d need information. She had to take Pesi alive.

Inside, she sniffed the air and smelled the acrid odor of unbathed bodies. One of them was hers, but the spices from Middle Eastern cooking, cumin, turmeric, cardamom, and cinnamon indicated others were here now or had been shortly before.

She opened the door from the hallway. The man seated at the large table looked up. Cassie and her body guards sprinted into the conference room. The man drew a semiautomatic pistol he had strapped to his leg.

She watched him start to raise the gun. She dove for cover, firing her silenced Ruger at him as she dropped to the hardwood floor. He managed to fire back and pieces of the conference room splintered into the air, showering her. Lester was right behind her and he dropped flat as he took aim. She got a shot off and it hit her target’s forearm. The flesh exploded, bits blowing back onto the room’s white board. He screamed in pain and dropped his gun on the floor. Cassie was surprised her aim was true.

She stared directly into his eyes, coming to a decision. Once again, the bullet she fired found its mark in the other forearm. The limb also exploded into crimson shreds of flesh. Now there was no way he could defend himself. She could kill him slowly and painfully, just as he’d wanted to do

with her.

She smiled at him, examining his beard, gray hairs within it showing his age. “How rude of me,” she said in Arabic. “I haven’t introduced myself. You must be Pesi Houmaz. I am Cassandra Sashakovich. To you I am death incarnate. You don’t have to be polite. The pleasure will be all mine.”

The man’s eyes involuntarily opened wide as he stared back. He was sinking into shock from his wounds.

\* \* \*

Thirty feet away in the restroom, Pesi sat on the toilet. The muted gunfire from the courtyard alerted him. Drawing the semiautomatic pistol from his shoulder holster with his right hand, he wiped himself swiftly with a wad of toilet tissue in his left hand, then got up and rebelted his pants.

He walked to the door and cracked it open. Looking out, he saw one of the intruders. Pesi fired at JD, grazing his backside. JD screamed in pain and Pesi bolted from the restroom with a shooter’s stance, reconnoitering the hallway.

Pesi was adrenalized, excitement pouring into his system as he saw another stranger. He fired but missed, and Ari turned, returned fire, putting a bullet into Pesi’s gut. He yelled, dropping the gun. Shimon and Lester dragged Pesi into the conference room. Cassie looked at the younger, beardless man in confusion. This one’s nose was flatter, his skin lighter. “Who is he?” she asked Tariq.

Lester repeated the question and placed the barrel of his Ruger against the shooter’s chin. In pain, he groaned, “I’m Pesi Houmaz.”

It dawned on her she had both of them here. Tariq hadn’t been buried in the caves. She smiled with pure delight. She didn’t need both. She could use one as an example.

She could see Pesi’s wound was likely fatal, but he would take at least a half hour to bleed out, certainly more than enough time for her to complete her work. She told the Mossad agents, “Please apply tourniquets to Tariq’s wounds, and Dermabond glue to Pesi’s. We don’t want them dying before we’re done.”

She pointed to the conference room chairs. “As we discussed, remove

all their clothes and bind them into chairs. Lester, turn on the camera and record this interrogation.” He positioned the camera on a tripod and turned it on.

Tariq yelled at her, his voice hoarse and beginning to fail, “You’re an obscene whore, serving the interests of imperialists who want our oil and don’t care what happens to our people. Your death would have served as an example, if not to your people, then to ours.”

She knew this much was true. But there was more. She replied, “Yes, I guess it might. But how can you justify the murder of innocents, especially children?”

He glared at her. “No one is innocent in your world. Our best weapons are brave men and women who sacrifice themselves to make our point.” He hawked and spat into Cassie’s face.

She wiped his spittle from her cheek. She could barely control her hands as she opened her knapsack and removed a hammer, a belt sander, and other tools. It took a deep breath to center herself. She donned surgical gloves and a dentist’s face-shield. “Even if what you say gives you justification, it creates people like me who want to torture the torturers. I’m just as evil as you are. You created me. Now it’s an eye for an eye, me and the two of you. And there will be many more like me if you don’t learn another way to make your point.”

Tariq tried struggling but with his arms shredded below his elbows, his movements accomplished nothing.

She shook her head. “What you failed to realize is that there was a reason why the United States funded your acts of terror. My government used you. You were tools of the very men you despise. Shame on you.”

Tariq screamed, “You’re lying.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s the truth. They could have taken you out anytime they wanted to. You were never safe, but as long as you performed to their specifications, they let you do their dirty work. Now America expects terrorism and will fund a fight to the death against you. They even had me reclaim the funds they sent you so they could recycle them to you. But no longer. The money is mine now, including what you sent to the warlords in Upper Pachir.”

Tariq’s face was a mask of surprise.

She looked at the two naked brothers in front of her and smiled grimly.

“You tried to mutilate my body and murder me. It’s payback time. I’ve looked forward to this moment from the time I escaped your assassin in Riyadh. Neither of you will survive the next hour. What we have left to negotiate is how much pain you suffer before I send you screaming to Hell. If you tell me what you intend to do in Washington later this week, I’ll just shoot you both in the head.”

Tariq faced Pesi. “You were wrong, brother.”

She nodded. “I want details. Tell me and your deaths will be fast and painless. Or you can remain silent and suffer more pain than you could ever possibly imagine. What’s it to be?”

Cassie prayed one or both of the brothers would talk. So little of what she had once been still remained. She wanted to dice them to pieces. What would happen to her if she went through with this? But if what she suspected was true, she’d need as much information as she could get. The lives of so many innocent people were at stake. Cassie waited but neither brother spoke.

Cassie shook her head. “You want games? When you attempted to assassinate me, terminated my career, and forced me to flee my apartment in Washington, this was the only possession I took.” She showed the brothers her chef’s knife. “It’s so sharp you won’t feel anything for a few seconds.”

She motioned to Michael and Shimon and they bent over Tariq’s torso, holding it fixed into the chair. Cassie gripped the head of his penis as tightly as she could, whispering, “You will no longer need this.” She felt disembodied as she always did before she killed.

But this wasn’t self-defense, and she couldn’t force her hand to cut off his manhood. She stood with one hand holding him and the other holding the knife. She forced herself to move, but nothing happened. She clenched the hand holding the knife as the seconds streamed past.

Lester came from behind and touched her shoulder. “Please. Let me.” She surrendered the knife. Both her hands shook.

An unknown part of her stared into Tariq’s eyes as Lester sliced the penis from him in one quick move. The shock of the act jolted through her. It was as if a part of her had been ripped away. Lester left most of the penis stem attached and pulsing blood onto Tariq’s legs. The terrorist remained silent, braced and grimacing.

Lester handed the head of the penis to her but she moved away, revulsion filling her.

“Now this,” Lester held up a battery-operated wood sander, “will hurt like the dickens.” He plugged it in and turned it on. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather talk with us?”

Once again, Tariq spat at Cassie. He screamed in pain, “You’re mad.”

She suspected this was true. But part of her felt a thrill at his claim. “Yes, I am.”

They had positioned Pesi’s chair where he couldn’t see what they did to his brother but Tariq’s screams filled the room as Lester applied the spinning wheel of the sander to the stem of Tariq’s headless bleeding penis. She knew he could see the bits of red flesh and blood spray into the air. She turned his seat and displayed the resulting shreds of Tariq’s flesh all the way down to his torso. “Guys, stop the bleeding with some Dermabond.” Her bodyguards stepped forward and squirted a large amount of clear glue onto the deep gaping space where Tariq’s organ used to be. The wound still bled, but not as fast.

Cassie felt herself come apart. More and more distant from herself, she heard herself say, “Where was I? Oh yes, I have to leave the world a message. Not from me, but from the agency. I’ll burn it into your flesh.”

She took a soldering iron, plugged it into a wall socket and shook her head. “Cost plenty to find one that works in Saudi Arabia, but like the telly commercial says, it’s priceless. Got this one at a hardware store near the airport. I bought it when we were on our way here after blowing up the caves with seven hundred of your men inside.”

When Tariq showed surprise, Cassie replied to his unasked question. “Oh. I forgot to tell you before. Sorry. I killed all of them. Every one. All dead now. It took a few hours. Now it’s just you two.” Smoke rose from its tip as it heated. “Change your mind yet? Wanna talk and I’ll kill you painlessly? I warn you the next act in our drama will be much more painful.”

Tariq’s lips moved but no words came out. He spat out “No!”

She shook her head. *Too bad*, she thought, but she didn’t know whether it was too bad for Tariq or for her. And maybe it was too late for her as well.

\* \* \*

Lester had to finish the work on Tariq by himself. The soldering iron still glowed, lying on the ground amid a growing pool of Tariq's blood. He hung from the wall, naked, legs dangling in empty air, his mutilated body penetrated by a spear at his anus, driven from his bottom deeply into his torso, his arms, missing hands, were pinioned by the spikes along the top of the wall.

Blood seeped in pulse-beat from the space where his penis had once been, oozed down in droplets from his destroyed arms. The handle of the spear's shaft dripped red. He looked like some massive butterfly displayed in a collector's case. He blinked madly as he fought death, struggling to breathe.

Cassie lay on the floor in fetal position. Her eyes were closed and she repeated the phrase "What have I done?" over and over.

Lester lifted Cassie to her feet. "Cassie, collect yourself. I'm done. You had nothing to do with what I did. Understand?"

She shook herself. "Okay. I can function. Please. Leave me be." She turned her face toward the wall so no one could see. In a much quieter voice, she said, "Show Pesi how his crucified brother looks." Her words seemed to come from a place distant, deep within. The bodyguards moved the younger brother's chair closer to Tariq.

She remained facing the wall as she spoke. "Look! The two remaining spikes and the other spear anchor are empty, Pesi. They're reserved for you. Unless you have something real good to tell me, that is. If you have something to share with me, I might just kill you painlessly with a headshot. It would be so much easier."

Without turning to face him, she was sure Pesi could see Tariq's eyes, still blinking, his face full of pain and anguish, the expression on his face reflecting a total loss of everything. Pesi remained silent as the Mossad agents dragged his chair close to her. She faced Lester. "I'm ready now. I think I can do this."

There was nothing left inside her that resembled the woman she'd been before her rape that last night in Riyadh.

She grinned at Pesi. "It will be my pleasure to rip you to pieces." She grabbed the chef's knife and reached for his penis.

Pesi flinched and sobbed. He looked up at his torturer and cried, “Wait! I’ll tell you everything.”

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## CHAPTER 36

*September 8, 2:46 a.m.  
Houmaz family estate,  
east outskirts of Riyadh,  
Saudi Arabia*

The blood-coated hammer dropped from Lester's hand. He took off the dentist's mask, surgical gloves, and apron.

Cassie drew the wooden box containing the head of Tariq Houmaz's penis from her pocket and found herself staring at it. The Houmaz brothers were certainly evil, but weren't they human? If they weren't, then, was she?

She was drowned in confusion, revolted by herself and her feelings. Was she still human? Was she evil? How could she tell? She still felt split into two parts. A piece of her rejoiced at her victory over her hunters and the discovery of their larger plot. The other part flashed visions of what she'd been before her journey started. Years ago, she'd been a nice girl, naïve perhaps, but not the destroyed raging monster she was now.

She stopped touching the box. She noticed the smell of death, the flies, the afternoon sun on the chalkboard of the conference room. She whispered, "I did this." She ran for the restroom and vomited repeatedly, even though there was little in her stomach.

Her parents would have been revolted had they seen this. Even her father, with his career working with the KGB, would have shaken his head. As an economist, he'd never be able to accept his daughter as a murderess. Her dad and mom were decent people. What was she? Could she ever return to what she'd once been? Could she ever become normal again?

*Get ahold of yourself!* Cassie shook her head to clear her mind and regain focus and thought about their mission. Urgent matters that required her attention.



JD stood—he'd taken Pesi Houmaz's bullet in the fatty part of his butt and he couldn't comfortably sit. He shook his head, trying to comprehend what Pesi told them. "Could he have told us the truth?" He pointed to Pesi's naked corpse, now upright on its own spear.

"I don't know." Cassie scratched her ear, driving away one of the hundreds of flies that came to feast on the bodies. "Damn, if it is true, this is worse than anything that's ever threatened the United States. Much worse than nine-eleven. A pending holocaust. But between Pesi's confession and the information Major LeFleur extracted from the terrorists in Upper Pachir, we can be close to certain it's true. Too bad he bled out before he could tell me the name of the mole."

She held the disk drive up and pointed to it. "If we can break through the encryption, we can add all the other evidence to these computer files Pesi pointed us to. The total is enough to convince me it was all worth the effort. There is a terrorist cell in place with three nuclear bombs intent on destroying Washington, DC. Shit! The question is, what do we do with this intel?"

Lester nodded. "Good question. Who in the American intelligence community trusts you? No one. In the Israeli intelligence community, who trusts any of us? No one. How can we find someone who will listen before the terrorists explode their bombs in three days?"

JD nodded in agreement. "We spent weeks crafting the plans we just executed so effectively. This time we don't even have a plan. We're totally unequipped to deal with this. No one else who is better equipped will believe us if we tell them. We could remain silent and simply stay away from Washington, but if we did, who among us could live with the deaths of five million innocents on our consciences?"

All sat silent, alone with their own thoughts. Ari offered, "Complex problem. Whatever we do will cause unintended consequences. If we leak word of this to the media, it would probably cause the terrorists to explode the bombs as soon as the news hit the airwaves, to maximize death and destruction before anyone could evacuate. So that isn't an option."

She came to a decision. "Get me a vanilla satphone. If this conversation can be tapped, it might help. Any intelligence agency listening would then share our problem. I'm calling General Shimmel. He needs to know. He's our strategy and tactics expert. Someone at Mossad might listen

to him. Oh, yeah, we have to tell him the mission was a success.”

JD handed her one of the Houmaz brothers’ nonsecure satellite phones. She entered the number and turned on the speaker, praying some intelligence agency had tapped the line.

Lee answered. Cassie’s voice changed, suddenly much softer. Even her bodyguards reacted, their expressions less hard as her voice no longer expressed the hate and tension emanating from her just moments before. “Lee, it’s over and we’re okay. Everything we’d originally planned to do is done. Except that the name of the mole wasn’t on the disk drive we recovered from Pesi Houmaz’s computer, and he died before he could tell us who it is.”

She listened to his reply, pledging his devotion. “Good. We’re ready to come home now. But we now know things, new facts, and we need analysis and guidance from Avram. Before you put him on, please know how much I miss you. I can’t wait to be with you.”

Shimmel picked up the phone and coughed. “Congratulations, Cassie, on your victories. Ach, and I just spoke with Major LeFleur. His men broke through the blocked cave and, of the ten MIAs he lost, seven are dead and their bodies now recovered, but two were badly wounded and trapped within the cave. Both will live. Only one is missing now and feared dead.”

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. The voice—Cassie’s conscience, or what little was left of it—cried out. Those men died doing her bidding.

She shook herself back to the current reality. “Thanks for this information, Avram. I’ll make substantial payments to their next of kin. But we have something serious still left on our plate. While we were interrogating the Houmaz brothers, we discovered they intend to explode three nuclear devices in Washington DC at or around noon Eastern Time less than three days from now, repeat, sixty-eight hours from now. I’ll pass you digital files of our conversation with Pesi Houmaz and the files we found on his computer in a few seconds. The computer files are heavily encrypted so we’ll need a hacker. Please review this data and call me back as soon as you are prepared to discuss alternatives. We’re done here and are headed to Riyadh airport. That’ll take about ninety minutes.”

“I’ll have a Lear waiting at the private air terminal.”

“Good. You have to decide our destination and file a flight plan before

we board. Cassie out.” She prayed the agency had tapped the conversation but in her heart she was convinced the mole would never have permitted it. And there probably was no tap from any other intelligence agency.

She faced her bodyguards. Cassie said, “Thanks for your help. We’re done here.”

\* \* \*

Less than ten minutes later, rolling down the driveway, past the flattened guards’ hut, the garbage truck was now filled to overflowing with eighteen able-bodied soldiers and one wounded soldier on a stretcher, eleven dead mercs in body bags, plus Cassie and her Mossad bodyguards.

They left the dead hostiles to the flies and birds, now gathering to feast off the softer parts of their exposed flesh.

The mercenaries traveled toward the airport for a half hour before the GNU radio buzzed and Cassie hit the Receive button. She plugged the phone into a small speaker.

General Shimmel spoke. “Cassie, I’ve considered all our options, and scant they are. I recommend we contact Mossad and request the Israeli ambassador relay the intel to Washington. I have good connections with him and within the Knesset. Should I commence this process?”

There was no real plan and there might be important details of the terrorists’ plan they still didn’t know. She looked to her bodyguards for their opinions. Three of the four held their hands with their thumbs up. Only JD held his hand flat, with the thumb flapping up and down. Cassie asked, “What’s bothering you, JD?”

“I think even if they work, diplomatic channels take far too long. By the time the dips figure out there’s a real problem, they’ll be flaming dust. Right now Israel’s ambassador isn’t much respected by your President, so it might be half a day before they even connect.”

“How about it, General?” asked Cassie.

“JD has a point. I still recommend working dip channels and praying for a miracle. However, we’ll need to be prepared to do something ourselves just in case talking to the dips fails. I’m crafting a back-up plan.”

Cassie’s eyes grew wider. “And this plan would be?”

“Instead of returning to California, fly to Washington and meet me and

Lee at the Israeli embassy as soon as you can get there. I'll have a detailed draft of the plan for you when you arrive. I'll get Major LeFleur to meet us there with all of you, including McTavish and the mercs from both forces. By the way, it is probable this escapade will cost triple hazard pay. Are you willing to proceed? Can you afford to pay three times what you've already paid us?"

Cassie rubbed her eyes, drained to her core. Her encounter with the Houmaz brothers left her with a taste for death, revenge, and blood. What if the politicians and diplomats denied the danger? She wondered if she might fail, just to keep from living the remainder of her life as a soulless monster?

Cassie heaved a long, loud sigh. "Avram, I won't pay anyone a penny of my money to save the bastards who were willing to let me die. But I will go to Washington myself. Please discourage all the brave men and women who've risked their lives for me, but if they have so little regard for their own lives, they may volunteer for this adventure. Tell your embassy I'm coming. Please also tell McDougal and Greenfield. Okay?"

"Yes, I'll call the Israeli embassy and also McDougal and Greenfield. Cassie, I will be waiting for you at the Israeli Embassy. When you land at Reagan, I will arrange buses to take you there." Cassie heard another voice in the room thousands of miles away. Shimmel said, "Oh, wait."

There was a brief pause, followed by loud whispering back and forth between General Avram Shimmel and Lee Ainsley. Then Cassie heard Lee speak. "I'll be there, too, sweetheart. In for a penny, in for a pound. Lee out." A click terminated the connection. She panicked, knowing if she failed, Lee would also die. She felt a wrenching in her chest and vowed to hold herself together. *Now is the time when I have to be strong.*

## CHAPTER 37

*September 10, 5:46 a.m.  
Highway, southwest of  
King Khalid International Airport,  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

She tried to focus on her success—she was no longer a target—but it wasn't working. She sat in the back of the garbage truck, swaying with its rhythm as it rolled along, her dust mask covering her face. She was relieved no one could see her face as she considered what her life had become and what she had evolved into. But now, there was a real opportunity to change everything. If, if only she could stop what the Houmaz brothers had planned.

The truck stopped when it reached within a mile of the airport. All the soldiers exited, leaving their weapons behind.

McTavish placed a pile of fresh Arab clothing on the hood of the truck and the mercenaries donned the clothing over their uniforms. Cassie knew they would not want to attract attention as they passed through the airport. As they changed clothing, stripped to their waists, their bodies stank of death and cordite. The men donned white, loose, long-sleeved, ankle-length garments made of cotton, called *thobes*. On their heads they folded *ghutras*, square scarves made of cotton, over black *tagiyah* skullcaps. They wore *agals*, thick, doubled black cords, to hold the *ghutras* in place.

Cassie and the other women soldiers donned the same outfit she wore when she had escaped from Riyadh so long ago: black *abaya* cloaks and black *boshiya* veils over their faces.

The truck rolled away driven by one of the mercs, containing the wounded soldier on a stretcher, and the body bags containing her twelve dead. McTavish told the driver to meet them at the refueling station where

the Lear awaited.

Seventeen of the eighteen survivors of the Riyadh operations walked down the dusty road to the airport, drawing little attention from anyone else.

All walked in groups so no woman was alone. They met up at the terminal for their chartered jet and began boarding the flight which might take them to their deaths.

Cassie sat near the back of the plane where LeFleur's men—all of them except the wounded—had arrived and also elected to come as volunteers with her to Washington, DC. More lives to be responsible for. She stripped off her Muslim outfit and changed into casual Western civilian clothes along with everyone else.

She was so depressed she barely noticed the overpowering odor of so many naked unwashed bodies in such a confined space. No one even thought about privacy as they changed clothing.

Battle had made them family.

After she'd dressed, she belted herself into her seat and looked out the window as the aircraft lifted off the ground. No one could see her and the sound of the jet's engines covered the sound of her sobbing.

She remembered something she'd placed in her pocket before she left for the Middle East. Cassie pulled out the wrinkled photo of Ann Silbee. She stopped crying.

Would the fallout cover Ann in Manhattan?

\* \* \*

Cassie couldn't sleep during the flight. The hushed talking among her mercs—and the stale sweat and body odors—kept her awake and nauseous. She stared out the window, wondering what she was capable of. She mourned all who had died helping her become something she hated.

Fifty-one hours until big bang time. She watched out the window as the sun rose and the plane descended onto the runway at Ronald Reagan Airport in DC.

Cassie was an atheist. There was no religion in her family or in her life. For the first time in her life she thought about praying for the lives of these people who accompanied her, trusted her, but she didn't know how.

She sat silent, sad, in her seat.

As the plane's wheels touched ground, she exerted command over her emotions. By the time the plane taxied to its hangar, there was no external indication of her turmoil, even though despair twisted in her gut and roiled her soul.

When the plane stopped rolling, she rose before any of the passengers had the opportunity to leave. Facing the others, she said, "I know you're tired and stressed but we all have to keep ourselves focused until we hear what General Shimmel has to say. There should be a few buses ready to take us from the airport to the Israeli embassy. Everyone form up into the teams we used for your last assault and board the buses. Once we're inside the embassy gates we can relax a bit."

It was bedlam. The men and women leaving the aircraft tossed their Riyadh outfits into the container labeled "Arab clothing" at the front of the plane and then filed into the buses. Few of them talked to each other. Just being in the nation's capital when a series of nuclear bombs was due to obliterate the city in just over two days would be enough to set anyone's nerves on edge.

\* \* \*

The mole had been away from the office for three days, visiting several military missile silos around the country where the United States removed the warheads from obsolete nuclear missiles, per the terms of its bilateral agreements with the Russians.

The van declared itself as "NDC, North American Division." The designation represented the Nuclear Disarmament Commission, which wasn't spelled out, the better to avoid drawing attention to the government vehicle. The mole had forged documents ordering the removal of the fissionable material and warheads from three obsolete missiles. The papers ordered the mole to collect these obsolete and now unstable and dangerous nuclear devices. These documents claimed the mole would deliver the material to the nuclear disarmament facility in Amarillo, Texas.

The mole completed a visit to a nuclear bunker in central Pennsylvania, and now all three lead-lined containers in the van contained missile warheads. The containers lay in specially designed cases in the back

of the van, complete with connector wires used to fit into the missiles' guidance-system electronics.

The mole glanced at the time while driving southwest on US 81 out of Harrisonburg toward Staunton, Virginia. 10:14 a.m. Behind schedule, feeling panic. The Houmaz family had threatened to kill the mole's spouse and son by noon if the mole hadn't arrived in Lewisburg, West Virginia.

Needing to make up at least fifteen minutes, the mole pushed the accelerator closer to the floorboard and moved into the left lane. Around fifty miles until the cutoff to US 64 West and then another seventy miles to the West Virginia border. From there, on US 64 the mole would still have another thirty miles going west into Lewisburg.

The mole passed every vehicle in the way and carefully avoided speed traps.

After a while the scenery looked like it might have been looped. *I must have been through the area before.* Sweat on the mole's hands made the wheel slip when shifting lanes. The van's speed exceeded ninety miles per hour. After ninety minutes, the mole turned onto Highway 219 and slowed the van to the speed limit entering the Lewisburg city limit.



## CHAPTER 38

*September 13, 8:46 a.m.*  
*Israeli Embassy,*  
*3514 International Drive NW,*  
*Washington, DC*

It had taken over an hour for the buses to reach the Israeli Embassy. Cassie scanned those seated at the third floor conference room table. General Avram Shimmel, Israeli Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Yigdal Ben-Levy, former Assistant Director of Information Security for the agency Lee Ainsley, and the US Ambassador to Israel, Benjamin Franklin Wagner—recalled from Israel overnight—all were seated.

Wagner bore an ugly smile. Neither Gilbert Greenfield, the agency's director, nor Mark McDougal was present. There were three more seats at the table, reserved for Cassie and the two mercenary majors, LeFleur and McTavish.

The other mercenaries—all of them—stood at the back of the room. Since none of the mercenaries arriving from the Middle East had bathed in days, Shimmel asked one of the soldiers to open the windows as wide as possible. Still, the pungent odor of overripe flesh was apparent even to the mercs who were used to body odors in battle conditions.

Cassie sat, exhausted, her head sagging into her hands. She struggled to lift her head, faced Shimmel and asked, "Where's McDougal? Where's Greenfield?"

"Neither can be found. I've assembled everyone who can help us into this room. They have all seen the contents of the Houmaz brothers' computer hard drive and the videocam recordings you made while you were interrogating Pesi Houmaz."

"Don't you mean 'torturing' him?" said B. F. Wagner, the sneer

scathing his face. He looked in his early fifties, overweight. Rage made his face red.

Shimmel gazed with anger into Wagner's eyes. "Had she not used the most severe tools available to discover and confirm what we now know, you would likely be burned to death in a radioactive explosion the day after tomorrow. You should be thankful for the opportunity to continue living." He paused a moment to let the words sink in.

Wagner continued, though, as if nothing were at stake. "How do we know the intel here is the real thing? You told the Houmaz brothers they were going to die. Why not claim this plan, so we'd go scrambling off in a wild goose chase?"

Cassie lifted her head off her arms, straining at the effort. She could hear the desperation in her own voice as her words poured forth. "We *chose* to alert you. You don't have to do anything about this warning. If that's your choice, I'll be gone from point zero to a safe distance minutes from now, and all these men with me."

Shimmel's eyes signaled a warning to her. Cassie backed off, but just a bit, continuing to stare at Wagner whom she'd never heard of before. "Mr. Wagner, if we leave and I find out anyone in the government at your level or higher left to avoid the explosions, and if we were correct and Washington DC is destroyed, I'll make sure the world knows what you did here today. Quite frankly, I'm too tired to care right now. So, Mr. Wagner, what's it to be?" She sneered and raised her voice just a bit in measured emphasis: "*Just-don't-waste-my-time.*"

Wagner jolted in his seat. "Okay. But as far as I'm concerned, this intel has no credibility. Remember, the United States doesn't condone torture. And we won't tolerate mercenaries or foreign armies performing missions on our soil."

"We're here as advisors, not as a foreign army," said Shimmel. "As Cassandra Sashakovich just said, when we leave this building, we'll be leaving the country. But for now, you might want to commence an FBI operation in conjunction with Department of Homeland Security, using the information we so kindly provided you."

Again, Wagner thought for a few seconds, then seemed to come to a decision and nodded. "All right. Yes, I've already done this. We've also got the NEST people—Nuclear Emergency Support Team—at work with us.

About fifteen minutes ago, one of their units got a lead on one of the bombs in a van that came in through Seattle. Homeland Security stopped the van and recovered the bomb near the intersection of New York and Florida Avenues. However, there was no fissionable material in the bomb, though the bomb was wired and ready to receive it.”

He paused, letting them understand he wasn't as dumb or as arrogant as he'd let them think. As Wagner scanned the faces of his audience, he appeared to be trying to guess how to harness control over them. He took a few seconds, coughing into a monogrammed handkerchief.

He continued, “The van contained instructions written in Arabic to drive to their command post at the General Lewis Inn, in Lewisburg, West Virginia. We have several helicopters with armed men now preparing to go there. It appears the device entered the country carried in pieces on our own military transports, just as Pesi Houmaz claimed. We assume the nuclear material would be inserted and the bombs armed in Lewisburg. The van contained a team of four Muslim extremists, and unfortunately, all died during our attempt to stop them, before we could question them. We don't know where they assembled the pieces. Somewhere during their trip across country.”

Wagner frowned as barely controlled panic filled his face. “We haven't yet found the other two devices. Our cryptology specialists believe the files you sent us contain a list of the parts of each bomb and their routes to Washington. But the files are heavily encrypted. Our cryptologists think it will take more time than we have remaining to crack the encryption. So I am ready to listen to your ideas and relay them to people who can help find and render the terrorists.” Now, his eyes reflected defeat at having to rely on people outside the US government for the intel needed to solve a peril threatening the capital.

At this point, Cassie struggled to restrain her emotions and remain placid amidst the room filled with near-panic. She spoke again, her voice quiet, confident, but cautious. “One of my specialties is cracking encryption. And since I left the agency, I have come to know people who create new encryption techniques, including the newest techniques used by terrorists. I had to learn these to survive. Please let me help you.”

Wagner snarled, “But I don't trust you. There had to be a good reason why the agency fired you. If I let you do this and you fail, the whole thing

will be on my head.”

She focused on his contorted expression. Wagner seemed to be filled with anger, and she couldn't understand why. She wondered if he'd been told what to do by someone else? If so, it would take a counter threat at least as unreasonable to reset his balance.

So who'd set Wagner to act on their orders? *Probably Greenfield*. She took a deep breath to cool the rage she felt.

Staring directly into his eyes, she said to Wagner, “Sir, if your folks aren't up to the task, you should have the entire city of Washington evacuated immediately and simply give up. Because if you don't evacuate the city, there'll be millions of deaths on your head. If you announce the danger, it's likely the terrorists will immediately explode the weapons in an effort to gain maximum kill rates. You lose either way. If you don't use my skills, you're caught between two self-defeating alternatives.” She sighed. “You seem to be willing to fail by the book, sir. You have a choice. You can risk using me.”

Then Cassie smiled at Wagner. “Know this: as I said before, I have a computer program set to deliver evidence of involvement of the United States government in this, including the events that made it possible. If I die or if the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet, or anyone in the United States government here at this table leaves Washington DC and then a nuclear bomb goes off, the program will execute, telling the world what I know. I have to remain alive to keep the program from delivering all the evidence to the press.”

Wagner sat silent for a few seconds. “All right, you can try cracking the encryption. Have embassy staff find you a private office to use, and I'll find you there.”

Cassie spoke softly to Ainsley. “Lee, come with me. I'll need your help on the mainframe hookups.” She rose from her seat and strode to the door. Then she turned around to face those in the room. “Thank you, Assistant Minister Yigdal Ben-Levy, for the use of the embassy and the resources of Israeli Foreign Affairs. And thanks to each of you who fought with me as comrades by my side. Oh, I'll need coffee. Do you know where I can find a machine or a coffee pot?”

Two hours later, Cassie and Lee sat staring at adjacent computer screens. She was so tired she had to stop every few minutes, vigorously

shake her head and slap her own face. She had consumed two entire pots of coffee and rose often from her seat, stretching.

Twice she'd taken bathroom breaks, but once she'd fallen asleep on the toilet seat. Lee entered the women's room to fetch her. It was the only sleep she'd had in over two days.

Lee acted as her assistant and helpmate. His computer connected to the agency's mainframe. He searched the mainframe terminal for encryption methodologies known by the agency, hoping to match them to those found on the Houmaz brothers' hard disk, now lodged within her computer. Cassie used a high-end computer to troll the Internet, trying to find a decryption methodology that could render the files.

Whenever Cassie drifted, Lee gently grabbed her hand and smiled at her, encouraging her not to fade. When she finally slipped into unconsciousness and slid from the chair, he caught her. "Come back, sweet. I know you need rest but not just yet. Please. We have to fix this before it ends us all," he said, holding her. Lee's nose sniffed her body. "Cassie, when'd you last see the inside of a shower? Yuck!" But he was still there, next to her.

The awful expression he bore on his face made her laugh. "About a week ago. I know. I smell like the back end of a camel. Sorry, Lee. Uh, please see if there's anything on your mainframe matching this technique."

Lee looked at his screen. "Nope. Move on to the next one."

In their first hour of work they discovered the techniques Houmaz used were a hybrid of several of which the agency had no knowledge and no way to crack. But they found information about many of the techniques on hacker blogs and websites.

## CHAPTER 39

*September 13, 2:32 p.m.  
Israeli Embassy,  
3514 International Drive NW,  
Washington, DC*

Cassie began to realize she was outclassed. With her current knowledge she couldn't decipher the files, and she had no way of learning enough to fill the gaps within the amount of time remaining. She accepted defeat and felt the weight of it, plus guilt at millions of additional deaths hanging in the balance. All that death heaped on her. Especially after bragging that she could break the encryption.

"Wait a second," she muttered. "One of these techniques looks like something a hacker somewhere in Silicon Valley claimed in his résumé about three months ago, when we staffed Kahuna." She thought for a few seconds more and then smiled as her memory scored a hit. "His name is W. Wing. He lives in Hong Kong and his call-sign is 'CryptoMonger.' I think he can be found at this email address..." She sent an email message from the well-tapped Israeli computer, not caring about the consequences. The message contained an attachment with one of the problem files:

CryptoMonger—Need help. I'm familiar with your skills from Project Kahuna. Attached is an encrypted file using an algorithm I am not familiar with. Could you tell me anything to help make this file decipherable? I hacked it off a computer 8,000 miles away, and that computer is no longer available.  
—Swiftshadow.

While she waited for a reply, she continued working with Lee to see if they could determine the separations among the logical segments of the

encryption algorithm. But, it was hopeless.

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## CHAPTER 40

*September 14, 7:02 a.m.  
Israeli Embassy,  
3514 International Drive NW,  
Washington, DC*

Cassie and Lee kept trying to crack the encryption while they waited for William Wing's reply. She knew he was their only hope.

A few minutes later, the computer beeped with an incoming email.

swiftshadow—may i call you cassandra? your real name is cassandra sashakovich. I got your call-sign and IDed you from files I hacked at one of the u. s. intel agencies. I remember you from hong kong. you looked fine in the black clothing you wore when you broke in my apartment in the new territories. when am I getting back my hard drives? what a tool you are. too bad the agency outed you. shades of valerie plame! and I see that you're single. so am i! got movies of you from the videocam in my living room, and your fingerprints from my computer case cover. sloppy work, dear.

i'll do this for you, but at a cost. you owe me a big, big, big favor and i'll tell you what and when. you must agree to do whatever i demand if I do this for you. reply, and that will be acceptance and confirmation of a deal.

—CryptoMonger

The reply stunned Cassie. "I *do* know him. His name is William Wing. I broke into his apartment in Hong Kong and stole both of the hard disks in his computers." Lee looked surprised. Cassie shrugged her shoulders and smiled at Lee. "It was my first independent consulting assignment, Lee."



“Lee said, “We have no choice. And little time.”

“I agree. I’ll give him whatever he wants if we survive.” She hit the ‘reply’ button, keyed these words:

CryptoMonger—Agreed, confirmed, and accepted. It’s a pleasure doing business with you, William  
—Swiftshadow.

Then she hit the Send button and waited with Lee for another email. Minutes passed, seeming hours to her. She began to worry that something had gone wrong.

The computer beeped again. Wing sent her a brief message explaining how he’d done the decryption, and he attached a decrypted version of the file she’d sent him. Wing also sent an attached Microsoft Word document accompanying the decrypted file. The email stated:

Cassandra—looks like you have a real problem. the files were a snap for me to decrypt. and what’s in them makes it easy for me to guess what’s happening where you are, so I might as well decrypt the rest of your files, if you have any more. it’ll cost you but I can do them much faster than anyone else; i’m the best in the world.

i backtraced the source of your email and found where you are now located. might get very hot soon.

price for decrypting the rest: \$2,000,000 USD, and you must wire this to me ASAP so i have the money before you roast.

what i’ve just done for you isn’t included in the price, and as we just agreed, i’ll tell you what I want if you live through this. let me know ASAP.

if you want to attempt decrypting the rest yourself, i’ve attached the tools you’ll need, gratis. i can do this four times faster... now i know the algorithms employed and it’s just a function of running them through my decryption programs. if they don’t work, i will find out why and trying a different set of tools. a piece of cake for

me.

i'm the best—CryptoMonger

The decrypted Microsoft Word attachment coming with the message contained a text file:

<u>Weapon</u>	<u>Piece</u>	<u>Truck</u>	<u>Route</u>
1	1.1 – Timer	1	Canada, Toronto, 401E to 81S, then 95 to DC
1	1.2 – Detonator	2	Canada, Toronto, US-219 south out of Buffalo, PA-153 to I-80 east, PA-970 to US-322 to US-220/I-99 to I-70 to I-270
1	1.3 – Foil Globe	3	Mexico, Nogales, 19N to Tucson, 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC1
1	1.4 – Bullet Tube	4	Canada, Toronto, Cross border at Lewiston, NY, SR 20/63 to IS 390/US 15 south, becomes I86/US15, to US 15/ Susquehanna Trail, 15 becomes IS 83, to 695, 95S
1	1.5 – Bomb Casing	5	Mexico, Nogales, 19N to Tucson, 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC
1	1.6 – Tamper	6	Mexico, Nogales, 19N to Tucson, 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC
1	1.7 – Plastic Foam Filler	7	Mexico, Nogales, 19N to Tucson, 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC
1	1.8 – Fissionable Material	NONE	Other Arrangements

<u>Weapon</u>	<u>Piece</u>	<u>Truck</u>	<u>Route</u>
2	2.1 – Timer	LAX (Los Angeles)	LA, CA 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC
2	2.2 – Detonator	LAX	LA, CA 10E, 25N, 70E, then 95S to DC
2	2.3 – Foil Globe	MIA (MIAMI)	Miami, FL, 95 to DC
2	2.4 – Bullet Tube	MIA	Miami, FL, 95 to DC
2	2.5 – Bomb Casing	ORD (OHARE)	Chicago, IL, 65S, 70E, 79S, 68E, 270S to DC
2	2.6 – Tamper	ORD	Chicago, IL, 65S, 70E, 79S, 68E, 270S to DC
2	2.7 – Plastic Foam Filler	ORD	Chicago, IL, 65S, 70E, 79S, 68E, 270S to DC
2	2.8 – Fissionable Material	NONE	Other Arrangements

<u>Weapon</u>	<u>Piece</u>	<u>Military Base</u>	<u>Route</u>
3	3.1 – Timer	Whidbey, WA	Seattle, WA, 90E, 39E, 65S, 70E, 79S,

			68E, 270S to DC
3	3.2 – Detonator	Whidbey, WA	Seattle, WA, 90E, 39E, 65S, 70E, 79S, 68E, 270S to DC
3	3.3 – Foil Globe	Whidbey, WA	Seattle, WA, 90E, 39E, 65S, 70E, 79S, 68E, 270S to DC
3	3.4 – Bullet Tube	Pensacola, FL	Miami, FL, 95 to DC
3	3.5 – Bomb Casing	Pensacola, FL	Miami, FL, 95 to DC
3	3.6 – Tamper	Norfolk Naval, VA	Washington, Dulles
3	3.7 – Plastic Foam Filler	Norfolk Naval, VA	Washington, Dulles
3	3.8 – Fissionable Material	NONE	Other Arrangements

Deep in thought, Cassie’s hand scratched her chin. “Wow, he really *is* that good. I think these are all the parts necessary for a nuclear device. So this is a ‘road map’ for their delivery into the United States. Shit. I wonder what ‘Other Arrangements’ means,” she said, referring to the source of the fissionable material. “The Federal NEST people found a van they claim is from Seattle, but it’s more complicated than that. The parts come from all over.”

Lee touched her shoulder. “Where did they craft all these deliveries into three bombs minus the fissionable material? Was it at one of the places listed here, and then on to Lewisburg, or did they do everything there? What was that van doing in Washington before it contained an active bomb? Lots of important questions unanswered. Maybe the other files have something that can help us here.”

Lee and Cassie viewed the contents of the text file. Without speaking, they nodded agreement.

“Two million is cheap,” said Lee.

Cassie sent Wing some other files she wanted decrypted. Within the body of the email, she begged a favor from the hacker.

CryptoMonger—

I have another request. Charge what you want for this one, and I’ll pay if I’m still alive. Please find out whose fingerprints and DNA belong to the attachment labeled “mole1.” It’s someone working at the agency and I can’t hack through their personnel directory’s firewall.

She hoped the answer wasn't Lee.

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# PART IV

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## CHAPTER 41

*September 14, 8:11 a.m.  
Intersection of State Highways 219 and 60,  
West Virginia*

The mole turned off State Highway 219 onto State Highway 60, speeding southeast. State Highway 60 turned into East Washington Street without any notice of the change in street names. Slowing the vehicle, the mole looked for the General Lewis Inn, at 301 East Washington Street. Exhausted, more panicked now, just a few blocks away from the destination.

The mole drove past a copse of tall oak trees, and down the long driveway toward the Inn. The mole needed a place to hide the van from the street. The back of cabin number 2 would do nicely, behind a large truck proclaiming “www. FrenchGourmetCuisine.com—the finest food on earth” on its side panels. Brush and trees around the inn gave the mole cover from the other cabins. The mole ran down a mental list of preparations:

*Remove the gun from my shoulder holster and load a shell in its chamber. Then refill the clip where that shell had been and place it back into the gun, yielding one extra bullet. Push the safety off and adjust the Kevlar vest concealed under my jacket.*

11:54 a.m. The mole looked for a guard but there was none visible—*surprising, no outside security*—then stepped in silence to the door of cabin number 4. *Continue looking for something missed. But there’s no outside guard. Look at the cabin’s windows. Big surprise, the shades are up. I can see into the cabin.*

The mole listened at the door and heard the faint sound of Middle Eastern music playing inside. *Sloppy work.*

*Crouch and circle the cabin. Raise my head just enough to see in each*

*window. In the front one asshole paces the room with a holstered weapon. At one of the side windows, a single hostile sits in a chair, holding a handgun. Can't tell the exact makes and models of the weapons, but from their size I assume they're automatics. Shit. My spouse and son are on the bed in the side room with one of the fanatics, hands bound and tied to the bedposts. In the back window, two more with weapons holstered talking, sitting on a couch in the entryway. Total of four unfriendlies.*

*The mole thought for a few seconds, took a deep breath, then another. Panic suppression technique. I knew this would be difficult. Too many of them in too many different rooms. No way for me to crash the door and shoot them all before they murder my spouse and son.*

*The mole stayed in place while considering different tactics, playing them through to completion. Each came to a disastrous end. Charging in, I'll die within seconds. Shoot through the window, my spouse and son will die in seconds. One other course of action offered a slightly better outcome, but not much better. No good options. The mole picked that one with the best success probability, even though it would probably fail.*

*The mole left-handed the gun and moved it away where it wasn't visible to an unfriendly opening the door. Then the mole drove every emotion from consciousness until the mind became an empty vessel. I can hear crickets. I can smell curry cooking.*

*Taking a deep breath to help sharpen focus, and using the right hand to knock on the door, the mole said, "I have a delivery for Houmaz."*

*The door was cracked by a young man who smelled like he'd never showered in his entire life. The man held a Beretta in his hand and motioned the mole into the room for a pat-down search. The mole stepped further back out of the doorway to the side of the cabin's exterior and said, "There's a small problem with the warhead I need to show you before we move it from the van."*

*The guard looked puzzled. The mole pointed to the vehicle, then motioned, indicating the terrorist should come out. When the terrorist took a step, the mole grabbed his hand, using an aikido move. The forward motion of the man's movement took him into range of the mole's gun, which the mole used to slam the terrorist across the face, rendering him unconscious. The mole dropped his limp body just outside the cabin's door.*

*The mole pocketed the guard's weapon and moved in silence through*

the doorway.

The mole headed fast through the entryway, which contained the cabin's kitchen and also had two doors. One led into the bedroom where the mole's spouse and son were guarded by a single man. The other led into the room containing two other terrorists on the couch, watching television news.

The mole took a deep breath and stepped to the bedroom door and pushed the door slightly, quietly swinging it open wide enough to enter. The mole could clearly see the layout. A man faced away from the mole toward the spouse and son, threatening both with his gun drawn.

The mole spun around the door, grabbed the guard's wrist, and used another aikido move to disarm the man.

But the terrorist yelled before the mole could beat him to the floor and silence him. The other two men came running to the doorway, remaining safely outside.

The mole heard them draw their weapons. One of them spoke English with a British accent. "Do you wish to leave here alive with your family? If so, let's trade what you have brought us for your life and their lives. I am Sultan Raman. Throw your van's keys through the door to me, and I will check its contents. If we have what we want, we'll move our other supplies into your van before I return. Then you will let Farad leave the room. We'll take the van and be gone."

"How do I know you won't kill us?"

Raman's voice seemed confident and calm to the mole. "My instructions state not to kill you unless you fail to cooperate. You are a valuable asset and we expect to use you again. That is, if you survive. When we are gone, do not return to anywhere within twenty miles of Washington DC or you will surely die."

The mole noticed both family members were gagged. The fear in their eyes was a visible mirror of the mole's. *I can see Raman through the crack in the door. There is no other way for us to exit the cabin without being shot.*

The mole tossed the NDC van's keys out into the hallway, keeping the gun aimed at the middle of Farad's face. From the other side of the doorway, Sultan Raman smiled as he turned, and walked to the van with his companions.



Raman returned minutes later and said, “We’ll leave now.” He tossed the French Cuisine van’s keys inside the bedroom. “It’s the French cuisine truck. Let Farad come out now.” The mole sighed and released the captive. Farad slowly emerged from the bedroom and the two others walked backwards, tugging at him, their weapons aimed at the bedroom doorway as they left the cabin and approached the van.

\* \* \*

It took four hours to complete decrypting the files. Cassie’s wristwatch glowed 2:32 a.m. Less than ten hours remained. She watched rain pour from the dark sky outside the embassy. Lightning occasionally brightened the night momentarily. Lee stood with her in the conference room.

Wagner examined the printed pages. He looked at the decrypted emails and then at each face in the small group seated at the table. He faced Cassie and Lee. “This will help.” But the expression on his face wasn’t grateful. He waved his hand in dismissal at Ainsley and Sashakovich. “Our men can take it from here.”

Avram Shimmel looked daggers at Cassie, warning her once again to be silent. She rose and exited the room with Lee following on her heels. “I need a shower, sweet boy. My clothing needs to be burned. Can you help out? I’m going back to the small office we were using. Get back to me as soon as you find out where there’s a shower in the embassy and please find me change of clothes.”

He nodded and moved away fast. She entered the office, curled up on the carpet under the desk, and fell asleep in seconds.

\* \* \*

Cassie stood ramrod straight, clean and well-rested, staring out the embassy window facing southeast toward the Capitol. The White House was less than five miles away. It was a few seconds before noon and they had failed to collect all the bombs.

They had found another assembled weapon, minus the fissionable material, and nuclear material for two bombs in one of the rooms of the General Lewis Inn but the terrorists had long since vanished with one completely assembled weapon. It seemed probable they realized their time

was short and decided to leave with just the one.

The missing bomb sat somewhere in the city of Washington, and Wagner said, “Finding the missing device will be like finding a needle in a haystack.” Everyone still worked at coordinating efforts to find the device, but with little chance of success.

She could see the tip of the Washington Monument rising into the sky. It was still overcast after yesterday’s rain. From her position at a third-floor window, Cassie saw the reflective glare of perspiration on the faces of the guards at the front gate of the embassy.

A bright flash from downtown jerked her gaze. Almost at the same instant, the glass of the window just in front of her face splintered into fragments, all chasing toward her as the window frame vaporized in the howling heat of a nuclear hurricane. Cassie felt the melted glass rip through her body, smelled her body burn to dust as her soul was snuffed out.

\* \* \*

Lee gently held Cassie’s head in his lap, stroking her hair. “Wake up, sweetie. That must have been quite a dream. You howled like a cat in heat and moved so violently, I thought you’d knock over the desk. You’ve been asleep for almost an hour.”

Cassie’s legs trembled as she emerged from her dream. She shook her head and slowly got to her feet.

He extended his hand to steady her. “Before you go, there’s something I have to ask you.”

She could see his anguish. “Is this about the bomb?”

“It’s complicated. There are two things. I was shocked by the torture video. It’s not just gruesome. It’s plain wrong. Cassie, how could you?”

“But I didn’t torture them.”

“But you tried to. You had the knife in your hand. You were ready to. What happened to you, to turn you into something so, so...”

“Okay!” She snapped back, out of his arms. “Yes. I almost did those things myself.”

“But that’s not where it ended. You stood there and did nothing while our Mossad helpmates did the deed for you.”

Her head fell and tears poured out. “Stop! I know what I did. What

they did. But, Lee, it gave us a chance to keep millions from dying. Doesn't that count for something?"

He had no answer, but remained inches from her, moving closer. She wanted to push him away now, but he held up one hand. "I'm not done. The reason I'm so troubled about this is, well, you see, knowing what you are capable of... Sheesh, it scares me." He took a deep breath. "It's so important because, well, when we worked at the agency, long before we began this journey, I had a major crush on you. You already know that, and you know I think you're beautiful. And now, after spending so much time with you, I'm deeply in love with you. Just know that." He hugged her.

She could imagine the look of shock he found on her face.

Lee backed away. "The shower." He handed her a stack of clothing and a towel. "Up two flights and take the first left past the elevator. Get back as soon as you can. I think there's something going on in the conference room. When I passed it, people were shouting at each other." He kissed her lips hard and sent her on her way.

She tottered toward the staircase. Two floors up, Cassie entered the hallway and opened the bathroom door. She locked the door and stripped, placing all her dirty clothing in a small pile.

Cassie didn't find any shampoo. There must be some, but she was impatient, eager to get back to work. She washed her body and cleaned her hair with the bar of soap she found in the shower. Leaving the shower she found deodorant in the medicine cabinet of the bathroom. It was made to appeal to men but she didn't care. The clothing Lee found was too big, an Israeli army sergeant's shirt and pants. Damn. He hadn't looked in the right place to find something her size. She'd just have to make do. Cassie sighed, dressed and then rolled up the sleeves and pants. Must have been the uniform of a massive brute.

As she dressed, she brooded over his words. *He loves me even though I'm a monster.* Returning to the office where he waited, she pondered her dream and its meaning. She thought about how her dreams tended to point her in the right direction.

He smiled as she walked toward him, her new clothes bunched up and folded over so she could barely move without tripping over herself. He sniffed her and smiled. "I'm sorry for the scene. But I had to. Anyway, much better. You smell just fine and look cute in clothing too big for you."

She moved closer. “Are we okay now?” He nodded and she kissed his lips. “Lee, the odds are pretty bad and getting worse for us every minute. Might as well accept it. We’re likely to die.”

“I know. I found out too late that I love you.”

She hugged him and replied, “Yeah.” But she didn’t say she loved him. She thought, if they died, what purpose would it serve to admit she was also smitten? The voice in her head yelled, *say it*, but she ignored it, unsure. She smiled at him, breaking away from his hug, and looked at her watch. 3:58 a.m. Nine hours left. “Now let’s get the hell back.”

\* \* \*

The conference room had an eerie glow, everything a greenish tint with stark fluorescent lighting that cast no shadows. At the front of the room a chalkboard descended from the ceiling. Avram Shimmel stood at the chalkboard near the front, printing and drawing on the board for the assembled men and women. Cassie had never seen him direct an operation before but wasn’t surprised at how charismatic he was.

Shimmel pointed to the top of the board. “Let’s review status. First, we recovered a second bomb, minus the fissionable material, in a van labeled identically to the first just north of Memphis, Tennessee. We found the jack on the left rear wheel, their spare tire on the van, and the original tire in the back of the van with a hole in it, so apparently the hostiles tried to change a tire without understanding the English manual very well. Must have taken them at least four hours to do it because their ETA to Lewisburg would have been about 3 p.m. at their current rate of speed. NEST ended them before they could discover anything.”

Cassie turned to the window and saw the courtyard below, empty in the darkness but otherwise as she’d dreamed it.

Shimmel pointed to the next line on the chalkboard. “NEST and the FBI reached the inn’s parking lot in Lewisburg and found evidence of several more of the Houmaz gang recently there. The FBI men believe they left in a hurry and told the police to contact us ASAP. This was over an hour ago. In a van at the inn’s parking lot, we recovered two nuclear warheads but no bombs. So there is one completed nuclear weapon missing now, and we don’t know where it is.”

She recognized her dream in this reality. *Oh, shit. We're all going to die.*

Shimmel looked away from the map and directed his gaze to Ben-Levy. “We don’t know if they left the inn with the weapon they’d just assembled or had to drive somewhere to perform final assembly. We don’t know how many of them are traveling with the weapon. Washington CSI is looking for fingerprints, DNA, or any other intel they can find in the room where they holed up, but it isn’t likely they’ll find anything soon enough to help. We can and should assume the single bomb remaining in play is probably in the city or on its way. Homeland Security has roadblocks on every road leading to the city. It is likely they’ll change vehicles to reduce their chance of detection. All we can do is to wait for CSI or the police manning the roadblocks to call us.”

She considered her dream. “Suppose the remaining bomb had been assembled and they were delivering it to its detonation point before FBI and NEST reached the inn?”

“What are you suggesting?” Wagner asked her.

She paced as she spoke. “I think we need to think like terrorists. Think like the Houmaz brothers. They planned this event and probably took painstaking care to ensure at least one of their devices would detonate before we could find it. I believe it’s possible they had just finished assembling the connection between one of the bombs and its fissionable material, and had just loaded it into a vehicle when they heard the NEST team arriving. If so, then it’s very likely they were working on the second remaining bomb when they panicked and departed. I believe the completed bomb is already in the city, armed and timing down to noon, protected by Houmaz’s men.”

Shimmel’s lips compressed tight in thought. “In order for an atomic bomb to reach its maximum destructive effect, it must be exploded from at least 1,000 feet above the surface. This would indicate a hundred-story building, and there isn’t one in the capital. Either they are placing it in a smaller building or they’ll be using aircraft. We alerted all the airfields and no one has reported suspicious activity. There are many tall buildings in the city, and only government buildings have security. Far too many tall buildings without security for us to search. And they’ll still inflict significant damage at any altitude higher than one hundred feet.”

Cassie looked southeast, her thoughts focused on her nightmare. “The Houmaz brothers seemed to have a real sense of irony, or at least they did until I killed them. When I was scouring Pesi’s hard drive for evidence I found plans for a few of their operations. They chose the locale or the targets in a few of their ops as if there was a message within the op. For example, two years ago they exploded a suicide bomber in a filled movie theatre where the film was an anti-war movie. With this in mind, my best guess would be they’re going to use a monument or shrine to explode their bomb, even if it falls under the thousand feet necessary to inflict max damage. I’m thinking specifically about the Washington Monument, about five miles southeast of here. It’s over five hundred feet tall.”

Wagner looked as if he’d been roused from sleep. He rubbed his eyes and looked around the room. “Well, it makes sense. I’ll have the local police force take care of it.” Before anyone else could reply, he’d left the room while punching in a number on his cell phone.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, an embassy clerk came running into the conference room, breathless, as if he’d run quite a distance. Looking directly at Assistant Minister Ben-Levy, the clerk spoke in English. “Sir, the local police found the terrorists. They’re at the top of the Washington Monument. Two of the three police who found them are dead and the third is badly wounded, but she was able to make the call to us from her cell phone. She said there isn’t any good way to approach them.”

Yigdal Ben-Levy rose from the table and gave the clerk his thanks. Then he faced the people seated around the table. His rage was evident as he pointed at Wagner, who had just reentered the room. “You are an incompetent fool. Pandering to a stupid President. Neither you nor any in your administration have an idea what you are doing. We’ve heard the reports. Do you think we’re also idiots?” As she listened to Ben-Levy, Cassie cringed at the indictments he hurled, his angry voice and the glare in his eyes. “We have a solution, Mr. Wagner, but it requires deploying a weapon we developed in Israel and choose not to share with the world. If you want, we can end this now. Or you can do your bumbling best and get us all killed. What will it be?”

\* \* \*

Wagner stopped fidgeting and sat back in his chair, thinking hard about too many things. He thought about the Posse Comitatus Act and its implications. The law that recently had replaced it was even more severe. That law was often cited as the constraint on the domestic use of military services. It prohibited the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps from participating in homeland security, counterterrorism, civil disturbances, and similar domestic duties. If the mercenaries succeeded, would the new law apply to this foreign army? What if Ben-Levy wanted to use the Israeli military's embassy guards? But then he realized, if this outside force of mercenaries failed, death for millions would be the penalty.

No one would know or care they'd violated the law. If they succeeded, he'd have some time to figure it all out later.

Wagner's wristwatch glowed 4:26 a.m. He picked up his cell phone once again.

\* \* \*

Gilbert Greenfield sat outside the Oval Office waiting for his old college friend to see him. He didn't have an appointment to see the President but had told the secretary this was urgent. He'd rushed to the White House immediately after receiving Wagner's phone message on his cell phone.

Greenfield felt mixed emotions over Sashakovich's survival. Having her take out the terrorists was a good thing. But it might also make the United States look less powerful for not having done it themselves. He looked up at the ceiling, wondering if she knew about the funds transfer network and would ruin his career as well as the President's.

He waited only fifteen minutes before the door opened and the President's secretary motioned for him to enter. The President, a squirrel-faced man with gray curly hair, motioned Greenfield to a chair opposite his desk. "Hello, Gil. I can only spare you a minute or two. I'll be in conference with the Israeli Prime Minister for most of the rest of today and the press is waiting for updates as they occur. What's on your mind?"

Greenfield swallowed hard. "Mr. President, we have a very serious problem, one threatening DC and the entire US government." The President's smile vanished and he sat back, wearing a blank expression.

Greenfield continued. “Remember the funds transfer network we set up earlier this year to move money to the Middle East for support of our friends?”

“Yes. I remember. You told me I shouldn’t get involved with it, to preserve my ‘deniability.’ What’s wrong, Gil?”

“One of the consultants we tried to obtain for some of the work turns out to be the woman who worked for me at the agency and had her cover blown. She declined the assignment so we never vetted her and didn’t know it was her. And—”

“Get to the point, Gil. I have to get to that meeting or the press will wonder why I’m delaying. The Prime Minister is already waiting for me.”

Greenfield gulped. “She was responsible for torturing the Houmaz brothers to death and she hacked the West Wing. She knows everything. Worse, the Houmaz brothers used the money we sent them to place a nuclear bomb somewhere in Washington and we haven’t found it. And since she knows everything, she’s told us if anyone in government, especially you, the Vice President, or the Cabinet leaves Washington before the bomb explodes, she has a computer program primed to deliver evidence to reporters proving we funded terrorism.”

The President looked as if he’d been slapped in the face. His jaw just hung open. “Shit. How did this get so out of control? Can’t you just use sodium pentothal or one of the other truth drugs to find out how to disarm her computer trap?”

Greenfield shook his head. “No, sir. Two years ago, we developed a drug causing our agents to suffer fatal coronaries if someone administers a truth drug to them. All our NOCs have been “vaccinated.” We told them it was flu vaccine. It was because we wanted to keep Congress from knowing all our operatives are NOCs officially working for government contractors.”

“But won’t that end the problem?”

“Sir, she must sign into some program somewhere at fixed intervals to keep the system from delivering the intel. If she doesn’t, all the information is automatically sent to the press and television networks.”

The President sat back in his desk chair. “Damn. What does she want?”

“Just that you not leave Washington unless you first evacuate the entire city, and you, the Vice President, and the Cabinet must be last to leave.”



“Our entire line of succession could die. Not just me and the VP. She could behead our entire government. That’s outrageous! That’s blackmail.”

Greenfield raised his hands and waved at the air in a dismissive gesture. “Yes. Yes, it is. But this is what she demands. What she wants is to permit the Israelis to try to find and disarm the bomb. She believes they have a much better chance.”

Greenfield knew what the President was thinking. One path led to possible death. The other would bring about certain impeachment. What would the President’s legacy be if he died in a holocaust of his own making and what would it be if he fled before the city was destroyed?

The President rose from his chair and grabbed Greenfield’s shoulder. “Okay, Gil. I’ll move the Vice President, the Cabinet, and myself to the bombproof shelter underneath the White House after today’s meetings. I’ll be sick tomorrow and cancel all my appointments. Make sure they find a way to locate and disarm the bomb.”

Gilbert Greenfield left the Oval Office wondering if today was the last day of his life.

## CHAPTER 42

*September 14, 9:29 a.m.  
Washington Monument,  
Washington DC*

Even this early, the area around the Washington Monument was thick with tourists. The hot, sunny morning was the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Barricades kept the few early-rising tourists from entering the Monument. The DC police turned them back. But there were few active so early. The few that wandered past the police found signs all around the building at the base of the monument: “Monument Being Cleaned. Closed Until 2 p.m. Today. Sorry For The Inconvenience.” The tourists went on their way. There was so much to see at other nearby tourist attractions.

Over forty men and women, each in the prime of life, approached the monument from different directions using extreme caution.

Each was dressed in casual clothing treated with a newly developed and vastly improved liquid armor, or shear thickening fluid. STF had been developed by the US Army in 2003 and could stop a .38 caliber bullet but this new version, modified at Ness Ziona, could stop anything up to a .50 caliber shell.

For some obscure reason that no one at the Israeli Embassy understood, all the treated XL-sized tops were Hawaiian shirts with the image of Jimi Hendrix burning his guitar at the Monterey Pop Festival about nearly fifty years ago. Cassie knew if anyone noticed the sameness of the shirts, they’d know this was a coordinated effort.

The young men and women strolled across 17th Street SW and approached the Ellipse south of the White House. Their clothing looked comfortable; the special shirts were oversized enough to conceal their

weapons.

They broke into two large groups of couples. Many held camera bags much larger than what would contain a videocam. No one spoke. Trained together, they functioned as if a single organism controlled them by a plan. They used hand signals as their exclusive method of communication.

One group turned south toward the Washington Monument while the other headed east toward 16th Street.

The latter group made lots of noise in boisterous conversation. As the first group neared the monument, the second group moved to the monument's flanks and closed their distance to it in silence. Three of them broke from the second group and casually moved to a copse of trees at the southern end of the Ellipse, nearest the monument. One scout briefly entered the monument's lobby and then stepped back out to sign that it was safe to enter.

At the Ellipse, three mercs sat behind trees, removed and assembled sniper rifles from cases they had brought with them. One removed an infrared scope to detect body heat. The scope contained a videocam to record events. The three then climbed trees near the Ellipse and hid in the foliage.

Once inside the doors of the monument, the mercs found a wounded DC policewoman lying face up behind the empty guard's desk in the lobby. She had a cell phone in her left hand. She pointed up and said in a hoarse whisper, "They shot two of my men. Both are dead." She pointed to the well of the guard's desk, where the legs of one of the guards were barely visible. "What's going on? Who are they? Are we under attack?"

One of the mercs, a medic, examined her as she lay in a growing pool of her own blood. With special care, he opened the officer's tunic and squeezed a tube of clear substance directly onto the officer's chest wound. The bleeding slowed almost immediately.

Then the older, tall, broad man standing adjacent the staircase said something in Hebrew to the merc treating the policewoman and they all faced him.

The older man stepped forward. General Avram Shimmel held up his hand for silence as he reviewed the documentation Assistant Minister Ben-Levy had given him about an hour ago. He looked up the staircase where they all knew the terrorists waited.

Shimmel had bluntly refused Cassie's attempt to join the assault team. "You'd be in the way." Shimmel wished he could have used the excuse she must remain alive to pay the mercs but this was not the case. The embassy sat so close to the monument it would surely be destroyed in a nuclear blast. Still, he would have less to worry about if only she'd stayed at the embassy.

Cassie demanded to accompany him and was now among those in the lobby.

If all went well, he'd be able to let Ben-Levy debrief them in just over two hours' time.

9:48 a.m. It had taken over three hours for the embassy to produce so many specially treated shirts that could stop bullets better than Kevlar and still looked innocent enough.

Shimmel looked at the nervous faces of the mercs. They had journeyed to America for this. He towered above most of them, and his charisma made him look like the great military leader he was. His voice was quiet, full of confidence. "Per our battle plan, everyone, gas masks on *now*." They all replied by fitting their masks on over their faces. "Order of battle is Team One, the gas team, followed by Team Two, bomb disarmers, followed by the videocam soldier to record everything." As the last member of the assault force reached the staircase, Shimmel said, "May God go with you. For the sake of all of us and the innocents, I pray for our success."

He pointed his finger toward the stairway. "Team One, in silence now, up the steps. Lead man way in front, with other team members three steps behind." As he lowered his hand, Team One reformed at the staircase. "Now, go. Go, go."

Cassie followed behind the last team member.

\* \* \*

Abu Ghazi Al-Khiel, head of the security forces responsible for the Houmaz family compound, looked at his wristwatch. Another hot, dry day in Riyadh. No one from the compound had reported in for over twenty-four hours.

His job as security manager was to ensure there was no unpleasant reason for this failure. He'd found himself busy all day with tiny "emergencies." Now he finally had a few minutes. Al-Khiel dialed the

phone number and waited. Again, there was no response. He tried once more. Concern made its way into the expression on his face, followed by a growing sense of panic.

He got into his Jeep, slammed the door, and drove as fast as possible several miles down the desert road to the compound.

\* \* \*

Fifteen mercs marched silently up the staircase of the Washington Monument. Cassie ran last up the stairs, following the soldier with the videocam unit. She wondered why she felt compelled to be with her mercenaries. After all, she added no value to the mission.

In the lobby, the remaining mercs all put maintenance uniforms over their armored shirts and left the monument to patrol the area and send tourists away.

\* \* \*

At the top of the stairs of the Washington Monument, the mercenaries found the doorway to the viewing chamber empty. From here, tourists could get a grand view of the nation's capital. The door, made of heavy steel, was put in place to prevent a fire from destroying the monument. It also served to prevent access by graffiti artists, though it hadn't blocked the terrorists. From the staircase, behind the group of soldiers, Cassie could see its lock had been picked and it was closed now. The terrorists had mangled the nearby elevator's buttons.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the door, Sultan Raman, along with Abu Aziz and Farad Aghassar, sat enjoying the view for the last time in their lives. The fourth member of the team had died in the van; the mole had slammed his head harder than Raman had originally thought. Less than two hours from now the timer would explode the nuclear device and they would be martyrs in heaven, forever enjoying the fruit of virgins. Pesi Houmaz had decided the explosion must take place at noon, and only if someone discovered them should they manually set off the device.

The heavy door remained shut and locked. In the confined space, the

sun slowly heated the area. The mujahidin had all removed their gas masks to wipe their faces clear of perspiration. None of them had thought it important to put them back on.

Farad said, “How peaceful now.” He lifted his head toward the very faint noises of conversation from the other side of the door. “What’s that?”

Raman’s hand held the bomb’s manual trigger and he put it on his thigh while he drank water from a bottle. “Nothing to worry about. Even if tourists come up the staircase and want to see the view, there are signs we placed stating the monument doesn’t open on Sunday until 2 p.m. The door being locked should give them no cause for concern. They’ll just go back down and leave. Even if someone does notice us, we can always explode the bomb earlier than ordered.” He pointed to the red button on the switch and turned back toward the viewing window, oblivious to the small enemy platoon on the other side of the door, less than five feet away.

\* \* \*

At 10:04 a.m. the lead merc—a tall man built like the models in health-club advertisements—stood on the staircase and whispered into the Bluetooth headset built into his gas-mask helmet, “Captain Sadler here. We’re at the top. There is a closed steel door here and adequate clearance for the gas tube at the doorjamb. We’re inserting it now. We’re green light for pumping gas.”

In response one of the gas-team members, Ina Boric, a short, muscled woman, replied into her mike, “Gas is now on. Potassium cyanide levels register a normal exit out through the other end of the tube.” Then, impatience in her voice, she asked, “Infrared sniper, what is your status? How many are they? Are they still warm?”

From the trees near the Ellipse a hundred yards away, sitting just under the top branches, a man’s voice with a Southern twang boomed. “Corporal Isley reporting. All four are still warm, Sergeant Boric.” His drawl was as terse as her Israeli accent. “I’ll let you know when their temps indicate they’re dead. Why don’t you try to relax. You sound tense.”

She scowled.

\* \* \*

Farad's eyes slipped shut, and then his eyes bulged as his saliva bubbled. He choked and coughed, then nudged Raman. Blood dripped from Raman's nose, foam poured from his mouth. Farad's expression showed confusion. He reached for his gas mask but he was sitting on it. Too late, he finally reached for Raman's leg where the bomb's trigger lay.

He fumbled with the switch for manual override and groped with the safety cover as his body spasmed into death. His finger jerked at the trigger and missed it by millimeters. His fingers moved over the trigger for another try, but death left him with fingers tight against the switch, no longer able to push.

\* \* \*

Abu Ghazi Al-Khiel gawked at the two corpses pinned to the conference room wall within the compound. Dry blood pooled black on the hardwood floor. Crucified, the two men looked like huge, gray, spread-eagled butterflies.

The odor of decomposing flesh overpowered him. Al-Khiel vomited where he stood. As his lunch hit his boots, it mixed with blood. Now the odor was worse, and he vomited again as he ran toward the door to the parking lot.

He wiped his tearing eyes and sat on the ground. He tried to catch his breath while he considered the situation. Al-Khiel had open to him two completely different courses of action. He could call the police. It was likely they'd think he'd murdered his employers, or at least that someone paid him to help those who had. It was unlikely they'd think him innocent. And very likely he'd never work in security again. He could just run, as fast and as far as he could. If he was lucky, he might be back to Egypt before someone else found their corpses.

He covered his nose with his jacket sleeve and returned to the conference room, looking for evidence to indicate who, how, or when this had been done to the two naked brothers. He looked around and found nothing. Then he noticed the writing burned into the chests of one of the brothers. Unlike most security officers, Al-Khiel could read English. He took time trying to read the letters, pronouncing each syllable seared into the bodies. Then, instead of running away, he used his cell phone to dial the

Saudi State Police.

\* \* \*

Sergeant Boric emitted an almost silent growl. Twenty minutes gone. The mercs waited, not able to proceed until it was evident the gas had exterminated the men on the other side of the door.

And time was running out. Boric's voice was just above a whisper. "The terrorists might be wearing gas masks if they suspected a maneuver such as this, or a very stiff updraft might have sucked the gas directly out through the monument's view windows if they forced them open. If the gas didn't work, we'll have to resort to sniper fire, although our new tech armor-piercing bullets fired from the copse of trees through the monument's stone won't be accurate in stopping them. Even snipers aren't always lucky. The walls might well shift the trajectory of the bullets."

Behind her, ten feet away at the end of the group of mercs, Cassie asked quietly, "Status?" Boric simply crossed her lips with her finger, requesting silence.

Cassie felt useless. Worse, she might cause her mercs to lose focus having to deal with her. She thought about returning down the stairs, but found herself unable to force her legs to move.

Then Isley reported. "Boric, their temps are dropping. Down to 94 degrees and change. They're dead as they'll ever get."

One of the mercs tried the door. Locked. He tried forcing it, but it wouldn't give. The hinges on the inside of the door were steel, not accessible from the side of the door where the mercs stood. One of the mercs removed a lock pick set and tried opening the door.

He failed repeatedly as the minutes passed.

Cassie said, "Let me, I'm good at this." The merc passed her tools and she knelt, examining the lock. She tried the merc's 5 Pin Kwikset KW1 lock bump key, but it didn't catch the cylinders. The merc had been using the wrong tool. She could feel Boric's breath hot on her neck as she reached for the next one in the set. The 6 Pin Kwikset KW10 didn't do the job either. Each attempt took just under a minute but her hands shook as she tried another, the 5 Pin Schlage SC1, without success. Damn. There were many more: the 6 Pin Schlage SC4, 5 Pin Arrow AR1, 6 Pin Arrow AR4, 5 Pin



Yale Y1, 5 Pin Dexter DE6, 5 Pin Weiser WR5, 4 Pin Master M1, and the 5 Pin Master M10. She examined the lock to see if she could eliminate one of the bump keys to save time. No good, she couldn't tell who'd manufactured the lock; its brass plate had been worn with use and the ID was gone.

Cassie took a deep breath. "Please stop crowding me. Give me just another minute." Boric moved back and scowled. Cassie tried the next to last one, the 4 Pin Master M1, and heard the lock click, sounding its release. The door sprang open. Cassie smiled and stood back, making way for the mercs to enter.

Boric turned on a fan to clear the gas, forcing open one of the windows of the viewing chamber. While the fans spun, three mercs hung aluminum blankets on the wall to prevent radio transmissions from exploding the device in case another terrorist with a cell phone was nearby and there was a cell phone detonator within the bomb. Boric tested the air with a small meter. She said, "Gas levels nominal. We can remove our masks."

Cassie scanned her wristwatch: 10:57 a.m.

Corporal Cheryl Swartz stepped forward to examine the bomb. The device was four feet long and two feet in diameter, and round so it could fit snugly into the warhead space of an ICBM. Its metallic gray paint had labels pasted to it, including a ludicrous "This Way Up" in red on white.

Although Swartz was a specialist in poisons and hypnotics, Cassie knew the merc had disarmed bombs for over twenty years, first for the Israeli army and then for Mossad. Swartz was their only merc with this experience in her dossier, and Shimmel had told Cassie he was happy to have her since none of his other mercs had even laid eyes on a nuclear device. Neither had Cassie. Just seeing it there frightened her and, foolish though she knew it was, she took a step farther away from it within the monument's viewing chamber.

Swartz said, "There's a timer wired to the device, counting down. Just over one hour remains to blast time."

Swartz read from a written checklist. "Task one, general examination. Two, detailed examination of wire connections and identification of wire pathways. Three, booby-trap examination. Four, disarm final checkout. Five, dismantle connection between detonator and explosive device. And six, dismantle and pack bomb parts for transport. Okay, we start now."

Swartz looked at her wristwatch. "Time at start is eleven hundred

hours.” Five mercs moved in on the bomb and began systematically reviewing each task Swartz named.

Swartz donned a jeweler’s lens and scanned the bomb’s wiring for booby traps. She took off the lens and took a more careful look at the entire device. “It’s a small, primitive trigger. Homemade connections between the device and the detonation mechanism.” She licked her lips.

As she watched, the voice in Cassie’s head warned her that death was closing on her, and her fear felt like something heavy weighing down her arms.

Swartz looked up from the detonator. “We may get lucky on this if it’s not heavily booby-trapped.”

The lead-lined container holding the fissionable material hinged into two large pieces. Swartz spoke to the bomb. “Baby, it looks like you might be able to produce a twenty-megaton blast.” She turned to Boric: “The container is attached by wires to a detonator. Farther down the line is the timer, made from an alarm clock probably bought at a local drug store.” Then to the bomb. “My, you are primitive,” whispered Swartz, talking as if it might respond in some way other than an explosion. “Too big to move in daylight, so they must have moved you here under cover of the night.”

Swartz looked at her wristwatch. In a normal voice, she continued speaking. “11:09. No mistakes, people. First, check to ensure there is no wireless connection to this bomb for cell-phone detonation. Then make damn well sure you doublecheck every step. See if there’s a backup detonator or a booby-trap mechanism to blow the device if anyone tries to disarm it.”

Private Harry Tonsis replied, “Checking now.” He ran a network search program on his cell phone. “No wireless or Bluetooth connection detected.”

“Any other wires connecting this bomb to something under it? Any gravity trigger?” asked Swartz.

One of the other bomb disarmers held a scope near the bomb and then near the timer and the detonator. “No. We’re clear for disarming.”

Cassie felt a great weight lift off her. In the back of the viewing chamber, she watched, out of the way.

Corporal Swartz looked at her wristwatch again. Then she ran her fingertips over the detonator, searching. “Nothing here unusual.”

She carefully lifted the detonator about two inches and used a dentist's magnifying mirror to look under it. "Wait. Here's something unexpected. Either they do have a booby trap or they don't know how to build a bomb."

Swartz tugged at two black wires. "There should only be one of these. Shit. It is a booby trap. Tonsis, get me the needlenose wire cutter, a piece of wire and a soldering iron. Hurry!" Tonsis handed her the tools she needed.

Swartz took a loud, deep breath. "If I route another wire to replace the path of this one going to the resistor, it might work. Or," she gulped, "we all might die." She lifted the hot iron and made two connections circumventing the original pathway. "Now I have to simultaneously cut both wires to the booby-trapped resistor."

Boric said, "Do it. We're running out of time."

She nodded in acceptance. "Okay. Here goes." She placed the wire cutter against the wires and said a brief prayer aloud in Hebrew. She snipped the two wires and caught the pieces as they fell. "That worked. We can proceed." Listening from the lobby of the monument building, General Shimmel said a prayer of thanks.

\* \* \*

Khali Al-Jambar, a reporter for Al Jazeera, watched as a technician posted the photos of the two naked, crucified bodies on the news organization's website. Then he returned to the task of keying the story Abu Ghazi Al-Khiel had told him, including Al-Jambar's own vision of the relevance of his story and the photos. He titled the editorial "Proof that the United States is an Evil Juggernaut." The piece called for the Muslim world to render the United States to dust. He began typing:

This morning, Abu Ghazi Al-Khiel discovered the two mutilated corpses of his employers, Pesi and Tariq Houmaz, at the home where Pesi lived on the outskirts of Riyadh. The Houmaz brothers lived a quiet life, but had come to the attention of one of the intelligence agencies in Washington, and they were tortured to death and mounted naked on the wall of the living room of their home, facing toward Mecca.

American intelligence agents might not know that having the dead

turned to face Mecca is an abomination in Islam. The flesh of one brother was inscribed with acknowledgement that US spies did this: *Such is the fate of all who fuck with intelligence agencies of the United States.* No one in the United States has denied their involvement.

The Houmaz brothers are survived by their father, an oil company president, and a third brother, who works as a Director in the Saudi Oil Ministry. No one in the Saudi government has commented yet on the torture and deaths of these very private brothers of a prominent Saudi family.

A devout Muslim, Al-Jambar became visibly agitated as he keyed his story. He muttered, "How could any US intelligence agency dare do such a thing to Saudi nationals on Saudi soil, especially to people so powerful and influential?" He posted the story, and within minutes responses came in via the Internet from all over the Middle East. At the rate they arrived, they'd have over a quarter million within two hours.

He smiled, putting his feet up on his desk. "I wonder if our web server is adequate to handle the volume?" He chuckled, and began keying the outlines for several follow-on stories. He'd get a wide audience of Muslims hating the United States from this editorial.

\* \* \*

It took the mercs forty-six minutes before they were ready to pull the plug. Every one of them now said a private prayer for their own souls as well as for everyone else's within a twenty-mile radius.

Cassie's wristwatch showed the time as 11:57 a.m. She flinched every time anyone moved.

Corporal Cheryl Swartz placed her fingers on the wires and then looked over at Private Harry Tonsis's hands, holding the manual for the disarmament procedure. He nodded his head.

Tonsis said, "It's now or never, sweetie. Pull the plug so we can go home."

She cast him an angry look. "Yeah, well, just leave me to do my job." Then she pulled on one of the wires. It came loose and she removed it.

Nothing happened. The alarm clock attached to the bomb began ticking much faster and Swartz took a deep breath and gripped another wire.

Once again, Tonsis nodded to her. “Go! Do!” and once more she pulled at the wire, but this one didn’t disengage.

She reread the procedure. “I need the wire clipper,” she said in a breathy, nervous voice. Tonsis slapped a wire cutter into her outstretched hand and she leaned back over the wire. “Time,” she yelled.

Tonsis said, “Sweetie, you have less than a minute.”

Swartz took another deep breath she hoped wouldn’t be her last. She clipped the target wire. The alarm clock kept ticking, going even faster now. She gripped another set of wires and pulled on both. They both gradually loosened and she tugged first one off.

Nothing happened to slow the timer.

Swartz frowned concern; she’d run out of time. And why hadn’t the timer stopped when she disconnected the first wire?

She gulped hard and pulled the other wire off the bomb.

The ticking stopped. “It’s disarmed,” Swartz whispered, exhausted.

Cassie’s wristwatch showed just after 11:59 a.m. One of Washington’s cathedral clocks chimed noon. Her hand reached down, feeling her pants to see if they were still dry. They were.

Cassie shivered in the heat, feeling lost. Slowly, she realized she was going to cry and reached into her pocket for a tissue. But instead, she found the wrinkled photo of Ann Silbee. Cassie hadn’t realized she’d put it there. For seconds she just stared at the image of the young teenager, feeling almost whole.

The bomb disarmers packed pieces of the device into plastic bags, placing the lead-lined container in a large black case with a Styrofoam liner to cushion the nuclear material. Four members of the bomb disarmament team picked it up by handles on the bag. They left the monument’s viewing chamber and headed down the stairs.

The gas team dragged the dead terrorists into body bags. They sealed each body bag and the gas team members picked the bags up by their handles.

In the lobby, they placed the two dead police officers into body bags and marked those bags with the police officers’ badge numbers. Shimmel had already had a team take the wounded officer to a hospital.

Their work completed, they all exited the monument. The top-floor viewing chamber's door was left open so, later, the public could once again visit. Around the lobby, they took down signs indicating the monument was closed.

Once they were gone, all was as it had been before the terrorists arrived.

Cassie knew a miracle had occurred. No civilians had died.

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## CHAPTER 43

*September 14, 2:29 p.m.  
706 West Kirke Street,  
Chevy Chase, Maryland*

The mole sat with spouse and son watching television in the family room of their house, thirty-five miles west of Washington, DC. It was past 1 p.m. No announcement on the television about a disaster in Washington. The mole had told the family as little as possible. “I’m not sure if this was agency-related so I called the agency instead of the police. I think we need a day to unwind.” They’d agreed. Neither understood the mole’s desire to sit glued to the cable news station, but neither had the energy to change the channel. The mole was privately overjoyed at having saved all their lives.

It finally dawned on the mole, nothing had happened. *How could the terrorists have failed? There’s no way! If nothing has happened by early tomorrow, I’ll go back to work. With the agency’s resources, I can discreetly look further to discover what became of the ragheads and their bombs.*

\* \* \*

Cassie asked a clerk at the embassy to obtain lodging for her and her troops. She said, “Any hotel, but just one hotel for us all. We all need to be together, please.” But there was nothing available for such a large a group in one hotel until the next night, and none of her exhausted mercs wanted to be separated from the group.

The clerk found places within the embassy for them to sleep there that night. Most crashed on blankets placed on the floor in a filing area with a low security clearance. Cassie was exhausted and happy to sleep on the tile floor, using a sleeping bag as a mattress.

Lee slept on the bag with her, holding her head on his shoulder.

She lay quietly, thinking about the final loose end: the mole. She tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. She had to decide what to do about the bastard. It was hours deep into night before she drifted off.

When she woke the next morning, Lee had risen and left the area. No one else woke before midmorning. No one knew where he'd gone.

\* \* \*

Early Sunday morning, the mole stepped into the office. The building was deserted. On the mole's desk was the daily report, but this one detailed the results of an unauthorized agency operation in Riyadh that resulted in the termination of the Houmaz family.

The mole read how one of the bodies had claims burned into its flesh that indicated a US intelligence agency was responsible for the kills. It must be the work of Cassandra Sashakovich and Lee Ainsley. But, of course, there was no proof. And the mole wasn't able to figure out how she'd thought to implicate US intelligence. Was it a message to the agency, to make Muslim extremists distrust the United States again, and to force the government to stop supporting terrorism?

According to a follow-on report, over a million Muslims around the world had read this news item on Al Jazeera and other Internet news sites throughout the Muslim world. The mole viewed the pictures of the naked, disfigured corpses with silent alarm. The article mentioned the corpses faced Mecca. *Damn. As if the murders weren't bad enough. I bet the insult wasn't an accident.*

The mole visited several Islamic websites and envisioned the outrage this commentary provoked across the Muslim world. What might make the news vanish? When the mole looked back at the monitor, of course it was still there. The story had broken less than an hour before. It would get much bigger very soon. The mole knew the pictures would appear on US websites soon. Without thinking, the mole picked up the phone and called a counterpart in the FBI.

The mole spoke with Assistant Director Moira Michelson. She seemed unaware of the murder victims or the suspected murderers. "Who are these people?"

"They're both former employees of mine who appear to have gone



‘rogue.’ The murders are all over Al Jazeera. It’s embarrassing to me, the agency, and this country. We’re being blamed when it wasn’t our op. We’d never do anything like that.”

The mole struggled to convince her this threat was urgent. “Lee Ainsley must be arrested as soon as you can find him, as a national security threat. Ainsley is our prime suspect in the Houmaz murders and, technically, he is still in the employ of the agency. Our intel has him on US soil so the agency can’t hunt him down. It must be the FBI. You. Find him as fast as you can.”

“You guys at the agency are so macho I wouldn’t put it past you to tell me he’s rogue when he’s not. Why should I believe you?”

“This is about to become a major crisis. He’s on US soil right now, and I need him found and arrested so we can question him.”

“If we do this, who gets custody while he’s in jail?”

“Moir, you know the answer. Ainsley knows classified global agency intel. So we have to retain custody.”

Michelson was silent for a second. “Okay, but for this you’ll owe me one huge favor. Remember, you owe me whatever I request, for apprehending one of your problem children.”

\* \* \*

Lee Ainsley felt like the world of stress haunting him for months had finally lifted. He felt lighter and calmer. He almost danced down New York Avenue. The thought that he and Cassie had survived had him grinning ear-to-ear this sunny Sunday with trees blanketed in the red and orange splendor of Indian summer.

He enjoyed walking past exclusive shops, entering a men’s clothing store, and letting the air conditioning cool him. He marveled at how men’s ties had changed, getting thinner during the two months while he’d fled for his life. He looked forward to returning to his job at the agency.

After a while, he left to look in other store windows. Somehow he had managed to cheat death and reclaim his life. He owed Cassie.

And, he was in love with her. There was no reason for him to look beyond that. He thought they would die together, but now what he wanted was for them to live together. He wore the grin of a simpleton as he walked

through the city, seeing it as if for the first time.

*Need to find a jeweler. Buy an engagement ring.*

He didn't see the black van following him. He exited the jewelry store with the tiny package in his pocket. He smiled, walking slowly. At first the van trailed two blocks behind him. It closed the distance to less than fifty feet and its rear door thumped open. Two men wearing dark suits and white shirts moved right behind him. One said, "Lee Ainsley?"

Lee turned and surveyed the situation. *Uh oh. Something bad here, and no way out.* He gulped. "Yes, I am. How can I help you two gentlemen?"

"We're special agents of the FBI. We have a warrant for your arrest." They both flashed their badges. "Please come with us."

"What's the charge?"

One of the men twisted around Lee's back and forced his arms behind him.

"Wait! Tell me what's going on. I have a right to know. I've done nothing wrong."

They cuffed him and forced him into the van.

Lee shouted at them, "Am I charged with a crime? You didn't read me my rights. What the fuck do you think I did?" There was no answer and he asked again. And again. The van sped off through the streets of DC toward Reagan Airport.

They had covered several miles before one of the FBI agents turned his head back toward Ainsley and told him, "You're a terrorist, an enemy combatant on American soil. You have no rights. We're shipping you off to a prison camp outside the United States where you'll be indefinitely detained. Sorry, chum."

\* \* \*

The mole was baffled at the terrorists' failure to obliterate the nation's capital. Had they failed, or just postponed their attack? There was nothing on the news. The mole spent the day locked alone in a conference room completing accumulated paperwork, emerging as the sun set. Then the mole called home. No answer, so the mole left them a voicemail message. "It's just after six. I'm on my way home."

As the mole packed the attaché case, the phone rang. "We have Lee

Ainsley in custody. We found him leaving a jewelry store about six blocks from here.” Moira’s voice was edged with anger.

The mole was stunned. Wasn’t Ainsley somewhere in central California? “What, him here?” But no response. “Okay, then. Thanks, Moira.”

\* \* \*

Hours earlier, the mercs had departed the Israeli Embassy for the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on 22nd Street at M Street. Yigdal Ben-Levy debriefed Cassie and Shimmel at the embassy. Ben-Levy told them, “I’m particularly interested in keeping knowledge of the new liquid armor from anyone. All your soldiers have signed non-disclosure agreements.”

Shimmel nodded in agreement.

Ben-Levy said, “And you may all keep the shirts as gifts from the Israeli government.”

Shimmel and Cassie signed the NDAs and went on to the next item on Ben-Levy’s list.

Hours passed, and just after dusk, their meeting ended. Cassie felt exhausted now, the aftermath of combat and her debrief meeting.

She left the restroom and passed by the conference room’s television, where she stopped to watch. She expected no news about the Washington Monument operation, and there was none. After all, their operation was a direct violation of the law.

She hadn’t seen Lee all day and wondered where he’d gone. He hadn’t left a note. She guessed he’d departed to a hotel hours earlier to get some sleep. But he hadn’t called. *What was he doing?*

*No energy to leave the embassy.* She figured she needed an hour before she could walk any distance.

Cassie sat in front of the blaring television and closed her eyes, drifting off. From the corner of her mind something alerted her and she awoke startled.

A cable news report. She watched in alarm as she saw Lee arrested, charged with acts of terrorism. She knew beyond doubt it was the mole’s doing. Now she knew for sure Lee wasn’t the mole.

She knew what they’d do to him. If he hadn’t already been taken to the

airport, he must be on his way there now. He'd be tortured in some foreign country. Rage energized her once more. As she rose from the chair, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Avram Shimmel standing behind her.

Cassie faced Shimmel. "I need to see Yigdal Ben-Levy." She sprang out of the chair and ran down the hall, Shimmel following close behind her. "They'll kill Lee. Torture him to death. I can't let them! Help me, Avram."

Ben-Levy listened and together they made a plan. He promised not to use the information Cassie gave him about the President's treasonous acts but Cassie was more concerned with getting Lee back unharmed and as soon as possible.

As she left Ben-Levy's office, her cell phone chimed, indicating an incoming email from Wing. The message was brief, containing just eleven words:

Identity of person with fingerprints and DNA confirmed.  
Mark McDougal.  
—CryptoMonger

Cassie stared at the short email for minutes, her jaw slack. She couldn't believe the man who'd hired her, the man she'd reported to, was responsible for the mess her life had become. Slowly, her jaw jutted, her mouth opened revealing her teeth in a hurricane of anger.

Shimmel had never seen her in a rage as furious as this one. He peeked at the screen. "What will you do?"

She turned and faced him. The rage faded, replaced by a storm of tears. She couldn't bring herself to speak. What was there to say?

\* \* \*

Mark McDougal used his computer to view a television cable news station, looking for the story there. He'd told his FBI counterpart to release news of Ainsley's capture as soon as they could in an attempt to blunt the edge of the news about the horrifying deaths of the Houmaz brothers.

He found the story on cable news. A talking head said, "Early this morning, FBI special agents arrested a director of one of Washington's intelligence agencies, claiming he was responsible for the brutal deaths of two Saudi Arabian brothers in Riyadh. But the attorney representing the

agency director told this reporter that the director, Lee Ainsley, hasn't been outside the United States this entire year. Further, the attorney told us the following story..."

The screen shifted to an old, white-haired man whom McDougal had seen in Washington but never met. He was labeled on-screen only as "Mr. Ainsley's attorney." Ben-Levy wore an expensive and very conservative charcoal pinstripe Hickey Freeman suit, with a bespoke, white, button-down-collared shirt and a blue-and-white striped rep tie. He said, "I find it odd the FBI would arrest someone for a crime committed so far outside the borders of this country when the person they've arrested simply hasn't been outside the country. And what would be his motive? It is true the murdered brothers were Muslim extremists. Classified information I received from another government indicates the funding of the Muslim extremists appears to have come directly through bank accounts that are the property of the United States government. I cannot understand what this government hoped to gain by bringing all this into the light of day, as this arrest will surely do."

The screen turned back to the commentator, who closed the report with the following comment: "The attorney for Lee Ainsley is Israel's Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yigdal Ben-Levy. Mr. Ben-Levy is a graduate of New York University's School of Law and a member of the bar in over ten states, including New York, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and California."

McDougal's jaw dropped. It stayed open while he considered his shrinking options. How much did they know about the funds-transfer network the West Wing had created under his guidance? What evidence did they have? What if Israel decided to publicize their evidence on Israeli television? Did they know the President of the United States told the agency's Director-in-Chief, Gilbert Greenfield, to create it? *Shit.*

He suddenly made the connection. Mr. Ben-Levy of the Israeli Embassy was formerly the Assistant Director of the Mossad. Now he knew how Ainsley had gotten an attorney so fast. Mossad would know the instant Ainsley was picked up by the FBI. The global war on terrorism worked that way.

Sashakovich must have been working with Israeli intelligence. If so, surely they now knew everything. He imagined his career disappearing. He

sat there for hours, once again with his head in his hands. *Shit! This day has definitely taken a bad turn.*

\* \* \*

As they left Ben-Levy's office, Cassie faced Shimmel. "I'm going to walk back to the hotel. I know it's a long walk but I need to think about Lee's arrest." She thought, *I also need to decide what to do about McDougal.*

Sensing she was troubled, Avram Shimmel asked her, "Please, Cassie, may I walk with you?"

Shimmel led the way from the embassy, claiming he knew a shortcut to the Ritz-Carlton. They walked several blocks in the evening chill, toward a magnificent orange and purple sunset.

When they were stopped at a corner, waiting for a traffic light to change, Cassie's expression changed from rage to sadness. "Tomorrow, I intend to visit the agency and have an unscheduled meeting with McDougal. I don't need my identification card to get in. I can make one with the equipment available at any FedEx Office, and I know several agents who are out on assignment most of the time. I can manufacture one with their identity."

As she spoke, Cassie's voice grew very quiet. Shimmel had to strain to hear her next words. "I intend to kill McDougal tomorrow, even though I'll probably end up dead."

"Sashakovich, no." His expression showed a father's concern. He looked at his watch and used his arm to stop her. "There are much better uses for your enemies than fertilizer. If you hold what you know about them as a shield and a weapon, you can have them perform tasks you want done but can't risk doing yourself. Including retrieving Lieutenant Ainsley from prison." He looked into her face but she didn't acknowledge his advice.

Her expression remained flat.

He knew she harbored a thirst for revenge. Shimmel shook his head. Barely above a whisper, he said, "Listen, Sashakovich, I have a personal request for you. Please. Tonight is the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, and there is a synagogue nearby. It is not very far out of our way. I ask you to visit with me. I need to pray for forgiveness along with every God-fearing Jew in this world, and it would give me great comfort if I have you with

me. You see, some of the terrible things I've done, I did for you, and I fear you feel the guilt we both bear. Would you do me a great favor? Please come with me. This is important."

She wanted to protest, to be left alone with her anguish, but as she looked into Shimmel's eyes she could see his agony mirroring her own.

Cassie nodded and followed him several blocks to a large, old white-stone building on N Street. Shimmel found the security officers checking passes the congregation held and displayed his old Mossad identification card. He pointed Cassie out to the guard. "She's with me."

Cassie entered the chapel behind him, and they made their way to the back of the congregation. As they walked they could hear an organ playing the ancient Kol Nidre, an enchanted and soulful tune. Shimmel donned a prayer shawl—the *tallit*—and a yarmulke, and took the prayer book one of the congregants handed him. From the back of the large room they could both see the old rabbi at its front and thousands of people around them.

The rabbi intoned a prayer, its words ancient magic: "We have sinned, our Lord. We have been arrogant, brutal, cynical, deceitful, egocentric, false, greedy, heartless, insolent, joyless, lustful, malicious, narrow-minded, obstinate, possessive, quarrelsome, rancorous, selfish, subject to temptation, unrepentant, violent, weak of will, xenophobic, and we have shown zeal for bad causes."

In response, the congregation intoned, "Our sins are an alphabet of woe." Cassie felt as if she'd been hit between her eyes with a brick. Remembering how innocent she'd felt the day she joined the agency, the blood drained from her face. Her knees buckled. She held on to the back of the seat in front of her and steadied herself, thinking how her behavior fit so well into all these labels. Tears dripped down her cheeks.

And then the rabbi said, "Rabbi Tarfon once said, 'The day is short and the task is great, the workers are sluggish and the wages are high, and the Master of the house is pressing.' For us all, life is a vain attempt, a struggle to press our insignificant deeds into this world."

Unable to stop herself, Cassie thought about everything she'd done from the moment she entered McDougal's office three years ago, when he'd told her what her role would be. She thought about all she'd done to help her government attain its desires through subterfuge and deceit. Rage, grief, and guilt all warred within her.

Every inch of her skin crawled with her desire to turn back the clock. But as she tried to bolt, her knees locked in place, trapping her. She was forced to listen.

The rabbi and the congregation continued to pray, and she was caught by another round of responsive reading: The rabbi said, “Let your judgment, oh Lord, fall on tyrants and those who wage war.” She thought about her own government’s heavy-handed dealings with less powerful nations, and how so often she was the willing tool used by them. She remembered every second of torture she’d had inflicted on the Houmaz brothers just a few days ago.

Cassie thought about what she intended to do to Mark McDougal, and how it would only push her further in a direction from which there was no return, no repentance, no forgiveness possible.

Thoughts twisted inside her like a car tumbling off a cliff. She heard that voice in her head telling her what she should do. All her plans reformed clearly. Cassie knew. Tears stopped falling from her eyes. She faced Shimmel, her expression resolute. “Avram, thank you for saving me from myself.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Shimmel nodded and smiled back at her. He turned toward the front of the chapel where the rabbi led his congregation in another prayer asking God’s forgiveness.

Cassie walked up the aisle and out of the synagogue. Still an atheist, she departed, paying close attention to something newly discovered deep within. The prayers she heard as she left soothed her sense of guilt.

When she reached the street corner, she looked once more at Ann’s picture.

Each step she took moved her further from the living nightmare she had suffered for so long.

\* \* \*

Nine hours after the FBI apprehended him, Lee Ainsley walked down the stairs of a military transport that landed at the American Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. He was immediately trucked to the basement of the Milli Istihbarat Teskilati headquarters, near Istanbul. It was the Turkish secret police headquarters. He wore an orange jumpsuit and leg-to-hand cuff-chains. He



dripped perspiration in the heat and humidity of the Middle Eastern evening.

A soldier held an automatic weapon against his spine, pushing him toward the prison entrance. Lee saw the broken attitudes of the prisoners, mostly Muslims, on their prayer mats beseeching Allah for forgiveness. They seemed like livestock in a slaughterhouse. His life had definitely taken a bad turn.

\* \* \*

Mark McDougal left his office and drove home just before midnight. He walked through the hallway, looking for his wife and son, but didn't find them. He guessed they'd given up on seeing him and gone to sleep. His wife shifted away from him in the bed as he entered the bedroom but she didn't say anything. He figured she was still in shock and probably also angry over the kidnapping. He couldn't blame her.

Without raising her head, she said, "Look, Mark, I know you saved our lives, but I can't live with someone who lies so much. I've placed a pillow and blanket on the sleeper couch in the family room, and that's where you can spend tonight. Or, if you prefer, you can have the bedroom and I'll sleep there."

He wanted to protest. Would that change anything? "Honey—"

"No, Mark. Before I spend any time close to you, I want to think about my life."

McDougal walked in sullen silence down the stairs. He suspected she knew more than he'd ever told her. And he couldn't blame her. *This is what I get for playing to keep my family safe and never telling them they were chips in a game.* When he turned off the light to sleep, he couldn't. Once again he was unable to escape thinking about trouble of his own making.

He rose off the couch before 5 a.m. He dressed and drove to the office. It just didn't pay to stay in bed when all he could think of was how his family hated him and he'd be off to prison as soon as Ben-Levy released the information he possessed.

\* \* \*

Cassie walked down K Street toward the apartment she'd lived in until the

day the agency issued a “burn notice” on her. She entered the lobby and scanned her mailbox. The name on it was no longer hers. “I. J. Ibrihim”

She sighed at the transition. Washington was that way. She picked the lock into the lobby and took the stairs to the basement. Near the furnace, in a space hollowed out between its bricks, she retrieved a small ziplock bag and pulled a plastic ID badge from within. It was a copy of her old badge. She’d need to change the bar code and name, but leave the photo as her own.

Off to the local FedEx Office.

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## CHAPTER 44

*September 15, 1:46 p.m.  
Headquarters of Gilbert Greenfield's  
unnamed intelligence agency,  
K Street, Washington, DC*

No one came to his office and the hours passed. McDougal thought the people around him knew he'd become a pariah. He read and reread reports on all the staff ops and the analyses his people sent him. Nothing stayed with him. He couldn't concentrate worth a damn. Just before noon, he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his chair toward his office door.

Cassandra Sashakovich stood just in front of his desk. She wore a festive-looking Hawaiian shirt, picturing a black man waving his hands over a burning guitar. Her expression seemed strained—full of hatred and irony covered by a loose yet grim smile—and she held her body in a tense state of alertness, as if she'd prepared for their encounter without any idea of her adversary's intentions.

McDougal took her in, her expression, her informal dress, and wondered how she managed to get past security. He stared at her, unsure of what to do.

After a few seconds he forced an ironic expression and a weary smile for a shield. "I suspect you're behind all this. Placement of the corpses facing east, Ainsley's attorney, the intel he and the Israelis hold, all of it. You know, of course, I can have you arrested right here and now. Tell me why I shouldn't."

Cassie seemed to restrain the urge to jump over the desk and kill him with her bare hands. She smiled at him again, a cold and ruthless grin. "It's been a long time, McDougal." She turned and closed the door to his office,

making her visit a private event. “You know, I was going to kill you today. But a friend convinced me there were better uses for you than fertilizer.”

McDougal scowled. He tried thinking of something effective to parry her unexpected comment. “Don’t be silly, Sashakovich. I weigh sixty pounds more than you and I’m six inches taller. You don’t even have a gun.” He pushed his chair back just in case she had thought about launching herself at him. He showed her his gun from under the desk so she could see it pointed at her.

Cassie laughed. “You’re such a stupid man, McDougal. After all I’ve been through—all because of you, I might add—you can imagine I’ve made it impossible for you to kill me without serious consequences to you and your family. I have a great life insurance policy. Should I die, you’ll be arrested within forty-eight hours on a list of charges that will keep you behind bars, or get you executed.”

Cassie brushed the hair from her eyes and stared at McDougal, waiting for a reaction. But he just stared back. She suppressed a bitter smile and kept her face blank. “And that’s only a fail-safe. See, I’ve hacked together a few redundant programs that are primed to execute unless I intervene to prevent them. Which I have to do frequently. I told Ambassador Wagner about them and by now he’s told Greenfield. And my guess is the idiot that runs this God-forsaken country knows too. At minimum, when I am dead, within days a contract for your death will be issued and sent out to eleven hit men I’ve met during my time away from the agency. It’ll be a contest to see who gets to kill you first and collect the reward. But the contracts won’t get paid unless they do your wife and son first. If you like, I can tell you exactly how they’ll die. Interested?”

She saw defeat in his eyes, but then all expression faded from him.

She tilted her head and smirked at him. “Even if you don’t try having me killed, I can still make your life a mess. There’s the evidence this President’s West Wing is responsible for funding terrorism so we can all live in a constant state of fear. In addition, evidence of your dealings with Houmaz, the delivery of the nuclear warheads, and least of all, your sale of my cover to Houmaz. A long laundry list of the dirty things you’ve done! You’d be able to watch it all on the evening news. Your wife and son will live in shame as long as they reside in the United States—if they’re still alive, that is. And don’t disregard the possibility some extremist group

might take their revenge for the Houmaz brothers by killing you, your wife, and your son.”

Cassie clenched her lips. “You just won’t pull the trigger. We’d both end up with appropriate legacies. Mine is vengeance and yours is shame.”

She thought, *just pull the trigger, motherfucker. If it isn’t a headshot, I’ll be on you in a second.*

Cassie watched perspiration drip down his forehead into his eyes. So he knew she wasn’t bluffing. She watched him gulp. *He must be trying to figure a way out of all this.*

“Listen, Cassie, it doesn’t have to be this way. How about coming back to work for the agency? I could hire you back in as a director.”

She saw desperation in his eyes and almost felt sorry for him. She couldn’t contain her laughter any longer and it burst forth, cracking her composure. “I think not.” She drew herself together as her amusement turned into a few short snorts. “I don’t need a job, especially one working for you. Now I don’t have to appear to be anything I’m not.”

Cassie pointed at him. “I know why you blew my cover. But your reasons don’t matter. You offered me to the Muslim extremists. Do you know what they intended to do with me before they murdered me? The torture they intended for me would by far exceed anything I can do to you. In comparison, I’m here to offer you kindness.”

Convinced now he wouldn’t shoot her, she sat in one of the overstuffed chairs facing his desk. “What amazes me is we’re so alike. Greenfield screwed you and you screwed me. We both started out as patriots and now we’re rogues. So, no. I’ll not work where you work. I have other uses for you. I won’t release the remaining intel if you follow my demands. For starters, Lee Ainsley. I want him back and home in less than the three days it normally takes to get a prisoner back from whichever country you’ve had him renditioned to. Charges dropped immediately and an official apology issued by Greenfield in front of the media on television.”

She paused until she was sure he understood the demand. “If not, you, Greenfield, and the President will spend the remainder of your lives in prison for treason, and your wife and son will live their lives in shame. Offer Ainsley his job back with a substantial pay raise and grade promotion. I want him to be your superior. He’ll run you for me. I don’t care how difficult this is for you to accomplish. If you can’t, I’ll make your life a

short, miserable one. I think you can do it and I have faith you will. And if you do, then I won't blow your cover like you blew mine. If you can demonstrate your usefulness, that is."

Cassie took stock of McDougal's posture and expression. He looked defeated. "Do you understand me?"

He nodded. But she wasn't sure he agreed yet. She'd negotiated well, but now it was time to seal the deal.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself to the next step in her plan. "Okay, then. Know that I can always hack Lee free and clear even if you won't do it for me. And I'd really rather have him work for me, but I know his preference is to return to the agency, the silly boy. So you'll take him back since it'll make him happy. In effect, you will also work directly for me, covertly, just as I worked for you when I was under NOC with Brewster Jennings and Associates. I will tell you what you will do and you'll follow my orders just as you did for Houmaz. Won't that leave you with wicked nightmares?"

She saw her reflection on his office window. A rock-hard look shaped her face. "After I have Lee returned to me, you will arrange to have Swiftshadow Consulting Group approved as a preferred contractor for federal services, with cover under other company names to be selected by me. We'll run some of your NOCs. Also, I want..."

She gave him a laundry list of things to do if he wished to survive. When she finished dictating terms to McDougal, Cassie told him, "Finally, you will not retire unless I give you permission. If you do retire without my permission, I'll release all my evidence. Now, do you understand what will happen to you, to Greenfield, and the President if you fail to agree?"

He nodded.

"Right. Now tell me you agree to my terms and I'll be gone."

She watched McDougal seethe. But with obvious difficulty, he managed to control his evident rage. He bowed his head. "I agree," was all he said.

Cassie knew it was better not to get him to put his signature on a piece of paper. She already had all she needed to keep him as her "pet dog" for as long as he lived. She turned on her heel and left his office, flicking the Record function of her cell phone off as she reached the elevator bank.

\* \* \*

The man sat at the screen of the computer in his office. His anger almost overpowered him. Outside, busy people tracked events and searched for terrorists. He'd closed his door and reviewed his decisions before acting on them.

He took a deep breath to settle himself. Yes, she'd survived. He hadn't cared whether she lived or died. But that was before her actions destroyed the value of his stock portfolio. She'd cost him tens of millions. Now he'd have to move the money fast before further losses wiped him out.

He opened his cell phone and dialed an international number. "Guten Tag, Herr Flouber. I have a numbered account with the name Ellbert E. Friend. 87-2458-9716-LF. Please close out every open short position with all my stocks on the NYSE and put me back into US Treasury bills, ninety-day duration. Roll them at maturity until further notice. Danke. Auf Wiedersehen." He picked up the list of identities and accounts and reviewed his progress. He moved down the list, calling each of the others.

He thought a second more. She knew too much. If she hadn't already put it all together, she might at any time. His complicity in the failed attack would call undue attention to him for sure. But getting her executed would take time and he didn't have a lot of it left. To keep him out of this, he'd have to use others with more power. Who was right for this? He picked up the phone and dialed another number.

\* \* \*

As the elevator dropped slowly to the lobby, Cassie thought about the past year. She'd been so naïve when she accepted her job at the agency, three years ago. She knew her enthusiasm for her job and her country had blinded her to reality. Her only skills of value were econometric forecasting, banking, and computer hacking. All she had learned at the agency was being a thief. This realization hit her hard.

For minutes, she stood in the lobby, looking out the large windows into the busy street.

The world was so different to her now. Fear was no longer her constant companion. She could remain focused even under great stress. The voice in her head now served her as her instincts, honed as a sharp weapon. Her eyes

had been forced open.

Cassie thought about her original judgments. McDougal was honorable. Lee Ainsley was a buffoon. Her government was correct to assert its place as the most powerful nation in the world with her as its willing accomplice. All wrong!

She'd been so wrong about so much, especially Lee. Cassie knew she'd have to guard against being duped again. Anger had not served her well. She'd grown too comfortable with vengeance, taking lives. She'd become a horror to herself. To compensate, she'd have to watch herself, remain aware of who she'd become at all times. Cassie wondered if she could ever be normal.

She thought about her mercenaries and her new friends, how she had trusted them with her life and how they had not failed her.

As Cassie left the lobby of the building and walked through the sunlight down K Street, she thought about her future. She wanted to make Swiftshadow Consulting Group a force for a more rational world. There would be at least a half billion dollars left when she finished stealing the remaining cash from the terrorist bank accounts. She'd need to hire her mercs on a permanent basis. She'd need a good-sized office with a few people staffing it. Maybe she could interest Judy Hernandez in a spot as office manager?

She mourned Evan's death, but then she thought about Lee. Lee had been everything she'd ever fantasized in a man, and after being so close to him for over six months, she was sure she'd never feel as much for anyone else. And she was sure she could depend on him to be her conscience.

She stopped walking, surprised by an unexpected realization. She really was in love with him.

She stood still for several seconds, savoring this feeling while the slow flow of pedestrians moved around her. Smiling like an idiot, she started walking down the street again, singing a blues tune by Chris Smither, "Love Me Like A Man." She'd heard Bonnie Raitt perform it in concert several years ago:

*I come home sad and lonely, feel like I wanna cry.*

*I want a man to hold me, not some fool to ask me why.*



The colors of the world seemed much brighter, and she could clearly see details of texture and deeper shades in the scene around her. She suddenly hoped she could be normal if she and Lee were together. But would he still want her after whatever tortures they were doing to him? Would he become as mangled as she was?

Had she lost him forever?

As Cassie walked past an alleyway on K Street, she heard a pitiful “meow.” She looked into the dark passage. She heard the “meow” again. She searched until she found a tiny black kitten, the size of a cup of coffee, walking among the alley garbage. The starving kitten looked up at her and meowed once more. Cassie reached down. It let her pet it, and it rubbed its head against her hand. She picked up the kitten. It fit perfectly in her hand. She was gentle as she rubbed its fur, and its purr was loud.

The tiny cat was as she had been when she’d first arrived in Manhattan: homeless, alone, desperate. Cassie looked into its eyes. Only trust reflected back at her. But she realized she could change its future by adopting it. It was then Cassie knew she had her life back. She was free again. She could do things normal people did.

As she walked on, she remembered vividly the dream she’d had in Carmel when Lee had awakened her just two weeks ago. She and Lee, much older, with Gizmo the cat and a daughter.

Now she clearly saw the face of her teenaged daughter. Her eyes misted over. It was Ann Silbee. Cassie decided to return to the Grand Central Station tunnels as soon as possible and get Ann out from there, adopt her. But would Ann still be there? What if something had happened to her? She hoped the teenager was still safe. She’d dreamed about being married, but since Evan’s death she had stopped hoping for it, and hadn’t ever given a thought to being a parent. Now it seemed like the perfect next step.

Family!

She could visualize the life ahead of her. A normal life. Her entire future seemed at once very whole and satisfying.

She thought about finding a vet for the cat, get it vaccinations and something to kill the fleas she was sure it carried. She walked off, carrying the kitten in her arms. Cassie said to it, “Little one, I name you ‘Gizmo.’ You’re coming home with me. I sure hope Lee likes cats.”

She had work to do. Serious work.  
Time to live!

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## Appendix A - Glossary

**AFI.** Intelligence branch of the Israeli Air Force.

**aleph.** Lead *kidon*, the assassin leading an execution mission for the Mossad.

**Aman.** Intelligence branch of the IDF (Israeli Military Intelligence).

**asset.** A civilian in a foreign country who claims to have valuable contacts or information useful to a case officer. The primary objective of most case officers is to develop in-country assets.

**ayin.** Tracker (surveillance) for the Mossad.

**backstopping.** Fake identification papers.

**bat leveyha.** Female agent for the Mossad.

**better world, send to a.** Euphemism for murdering an enemy agent.

**blind dating.** Meeting place chosen by an agent to meet his or her handler.

**bodel.** Courier for the Mossad.

**BP.** Israeli paramilitary Border Patrol.

**burn notice.** A termination notice for an official operative or an NOC; the burned spy has his or her bank accounts confiscated and identity documents redacted, and, in extreme cases, is subject to a terminate-on-sight order.

**C-6.** A more powerful and concentrated form of the C-4 explosive.

**Chinese Secret Intelligence Services (CSIS).** Chinese version of the FBI.

**CHIPS.** The Clearinghouse Interface Processing System, used by money-center banks to settle all outstanding transactions between them at the end of their day.

**Collections Department.** Intelligence Department abroad for the Mossad; traditional espionage.

**cutout.** An intermediary, usually an innocent person, either a volunteer or

paid by a covert operative to deliver or retrieve something valuable such as a message or a gadget, from a covert operative or an asset.

**DARPA.** Defense Department's agency for advanced research projects, charged with development of weapons systems for the United States.

**daylight alert.** Highest priority alert.

**DDOS.** Distributed denial of service; a brute-force method of bringing down a website, by overloading it with traffic. Rarely used successfully by any except the most desperate and skillful of hackers.

**dry cleaning.** Counter-surveillance techniques.

**ECHELON.** An identity-tracking system developed by contract programmers and used by the United States as its primary terrorism prevention system prior to 9/11. There are currently in excess of forty systems developed since 9/11, used by the NSA to track the identities of US citizens and foreigners.

**EFT.** Electronic Funds Transfer, the basic term denoting a non-check payment.

**EMP.** Electromagnetic pulse device that unleashes a high-energy discharge that fries all electronic devices within its range.

**exfiltrate.** To retrieve an agent from hostile territory.

**Farm, The.** A camp in Virginia used to train CIA case officers and the case officers of intelligence services friendly to the United States.

**FSB.** The Russian internal security and counterintelligence service, created in 1994 as one of the successor agencies of the Soviet-era KGB.

**go bag.** A lightweight luggage carrier used by covert operatives to carry travel essentials, including emergency clothing and sundries, weapons and ammunition. When not being used, it is typically stored, fully loaded, near a door or under a window for fast access.

**heth.** Logistician for the Mossad.

**false flagging.** An operation falsely made to appear mounted by another country.

**fumigate.** Sweeping an area for electronic bugs.

**honey trap.** Sexual entrapment for intelligence purposes.

**IDF.** Israel Defense Forces; the Israeli army.

**katsa.** Case officer for the Mossad.

**KGB.** Soviet Union's secret police, the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopanosti was established in March 1954 in Moscow and was attached to the Council of Ministers, but operated independently. With over 500,000 employees, it was the largest spy agency in the world.

**Liquid armor, or shear thickening fluid (STF).** Developed by the U S Army in 2003, STF can stop a .38 caliber bullet, but improved versions can stop anything up to a .50 caliber shell

**kidon.** Operative specializing in assassination for the Mossad. (plural: *kidonim*.)

**Krav Maga.** Israeli martial art developed by Aman and used by IDF and Mossad. Now taught to many of the global spy agencies.

**MI-6.** Also known as Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service.

**Mossad.** The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations; originally called the Institute for Coordination; called "the Office" by those who work there.

**Ness Ziona.** Israeli weapons laboratory, located in Herzliyya, Israel.

**neviot.** Surveillance specialist for the Mossad.

**NI.** Intelligence branch of the Israeli navy.

**NOC.** Non-official cover; the status of a contractor working with the CIA in-country and without sanction or cover from the Agency.

**NSA.** National Security Agency; formed under the Truman administration and used as the technology management arm of the United States government.

**Office, The.** The name of the Mossad used by most of its case officers (*katsas*).

**qoph.** Communications officer for the Mossad.

**RAID.** Redundant array of independent disks; used as a physical non-cloud

device for backup of high-value data.

**RSA.** An encryption algorithm, or key, used to safely send messages between parties on the Internet.

**safe house.** Apartment or house used covertly for base of operations

**sayan.** A helper for the Mossad. (plural: *sayanim*.)

**Shabak.** Also known as GSS or Shin Bet; responsible for internal security and defense of Israeli installations abroad, including embassies, consulates, and other organizations.

**slick.** Hiding place for documents.

**souk.** A Middle Eastern marketplace, usually an open-air farmer's market that also sells craft items.

**surveillance detection route.** A method used by covert agents, walking back and forth several city blocks, looking in the reflective surfaces to discern if they are being followed.

**SWIFT.** The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications, a European agency that sets standards for global financial messages used by banks for near-real-time settlement of electronic funds transfers. The transaction types (debit memo, credit memo, etc.) have numbers to identify them; e.g., MT100 is a credit memo sent by one bank to another to indicate payment via real-time book entry.

**Tze'elim.** Israel's Urban Warfare Training Center in the Negev Desert.

**Va'adet Rashei Hasherutim.** The committee of the heads of service in Israel's intelligence community. Mossad is a prime member.

**Vory.** Russian criminal brotherhood, compatriots.

**Wahhabi.** Puritan doctrine of Islam, founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in Saudi Arabia.

**wash.** Recycling of a valid passport obtained by theft or purchase.

**yahalom.** A covert computer hacker or cybercriminal working for the Mossad's Yahalomin unit.

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## **Appendix B - Character List for the Spies Lie series (alphabetical)**

**Lee Ainsley.** Director of Information Security at Gilbert Greenfield's unnamed intelligence service in Washington, DC. He has a crush on Cassandra Sashakovich.

**Hazret Ali.** Tribal leader in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan.

**Yigdal Ben-Levy.** Call-sign "*Emah*" or Mother. Ben-Levy is the Associate Director of the Mossad, a spymaster who also runs liaison between them and Aman. Ben-Levy runs the dirtiest black ops missions. His niece, Aviva Bushovsky, died one year ago.

**Elizabeth Rochelle Brown.** Call-sign Butterfly. Hacker living in Woodbine, Iowa. Self-proclaimed as the best hacker on earth. William Wing claims the same thing about himself.

**Aviva Bushovsky.** Call-sign Sweetthing, aka Lisa Gabriel. Under cover, she became engaged to Jon Sommers. She was a Mossad *bat leveyha*, niece of Yigdal Ben-Levy. Aviva died in a car bomb set in the parking garage in Herzliyya where she'd left her car to meet Ruth Cohen for lunch.

**Lieutenant Benjamin Chan.** A direct report to Xian Wing, Benjamin's mother was English, and hence his Western first name.

**Norman Cisco.** Currency Custodian working at the Federal Reserve Bank in Manhattan.

**Ruth Cohen.** Call-sign Toots, alias Ruth DeWitt. Cohen rose through the ranks from *bat leveyha* (honey pot) to *kidon* to *katsa*, and is now Mossad Station Chief, Berlin, Germany. Less than one year ago, she and Jon Sommers were lovers.

**Sir Charles Crane.** Call sign Mastercollector, a British spymaster at MI-6, whose career was almost terminated by Jon Sommers' parents, Abel and Natasha Sommerstein.



**Michael Drapoff.** A *kidon* reporting to Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Lester Dushov.** A *katsa* reporting to Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Simon Fiernen.** A cover identity for Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Bob Gault.** Call-sign Snakecharmer, works as a case officer at Gilbert Greenfield's unnamed intelligence service in Washington, DC. Gault is overweight and unpromotable, but he is also an effective operative.

**Oscar Gilead.** Director of the Mossad, to whom Yigdal Ben-Levy reports.

**Major Ralph Giondella.** American Tactics Commander.

**Gilbert Greenfield.** Director in Charge of an intelligence agency in Washington DC so secret that it is "unnamed." Aliases include Herr Flouber and Ellbert E. Friend.

**Abdul Hassain.** Abdul was hired by Pesi Houmaz to torture and murder Cassandra Sashakovich in Riyadh after first determining if she had learned of the Houmaz brothers plans to attack the United States. He raped and impregnated her before Cassandra was able to kill him in self-defense.

**Judy Hernandez.** A personal trainer working at the YMCA in Manhattan.

**Achmed Houmaz.** Youngest of the brothers, Achmed was left to run Arab Oil Corporation after Tariq was disowned by their father and Pesi followed Tariq from the family. Achmed resides in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

**Pesi Houmaz.** Second in command of a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot group headquartered at its training facility near Upper Pachir, Afghanistan. Pesi is the brother of Tariq Houmaz. Pesi resides in Saudi Arabia.

**Tariq Houmaz.** Leader of Muslim Brotherhood offshoot terrorism group, located near Upper Pachir, Afghanistan.

**Maukvi Muhammed Khalis.** Hazret Ali's mullah, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan.

**Nomi Klein.** Cobbler (document forger) working for the Mossad in the South Bronx, New York.

**Misha Kovich.** Cassandra Sashakovich's uncle and Kiril Sashakovich's

brother. Worked for the KGB until the fall of the Soviet Union, then worked for the Russian Mafiya transporting weapons and money between Moscow and Vladivostok.

**Lily Lee.** A girlfriend of William Wing, she lives in Hong Kong. She is also a call girl and her father owns an upscale restaurant, Star Luk restaurant in Hong Kong's harbor.

**Major Jacques LeFleur.** French North African Battle Operations Specialist.

**Clyde MacIntosh.** Case officer, MI-6, reporting to Sir Charles Crane.

**Adam Mahee.** Stanford University adjunct faculty, project manager and contractor, Silicon Valley.

**Debra McCandless.** Treasurer of Stillwater Technologies, Inc., a Silicon Valley chipset developer in San Jose, California.

**Mark McDougal.** Director, unnamed intelligence agency, Washington, DC. McDougal is Bob Gault and Cassandra Sashakovich's boss. McDougal reports to Gilbert Greenfield, who runs an agency so secret that it is "unnamed."

**Major Alister McTavish.** British Tactics Commander, hired as a mercenary by Major Avram Shimmel.

**Samuel Meyer.** Call-sign Uncle Sam. Associate Director of the Mossad and liaison to Aman, successor to Yigdal Ben-Levy. Meyer graduated from Harvard Law School.

**Shula Ries.** Call-sign Viper, Mossad *kidon* who reports to Yigdal Ben-Levy. Ries is more than just a honeypot for the Mossad. She is lethal with any weapon and has no conscience.

**Lev Robinson.** A Ness Ziona scientist who works on Bug-Lok, and was turned into a mole by Sir Charles Crane, an MI-6 spymaster.

**Cassandra Sashakovich.** Call-sign Swiftshadow, Multiple aliases, including Chandra Paklorri, Chrissie Card, Darla Kidon, Denise Hardcastle, Susan Blumenthal, Elaine Teman, and Emily Fishcallow. Former NOC and hacker at Gilbert Greenfield's unnamed intelligence service in Washington, DC. She has gone black, outed by a mole within

the agency, and now is hunted by the Houmaz family.

**Kiril Sashakovich.** Cassandra's father, professor of economics, Stanford University, and former econometric planner for the now defunct Soviet Union.

**Natasha Sashakovich. Cassandra's** mother, member of the Half Moon Bay, California city council, and former case officer for the KGB.

**Gunda Schlein.** Finance Manager, Dreitsbank, Munich. Schlein's brother is held by MI-6 to compel her to spy on Jon Sommers. But Sommers has also tried to double her.

**Dr. Henry Sheldorff.** High-priced Manhattan plastic surgeon.

**Avram Shimmel.** Call-sign Clearcut, mercenary, former major in the IDF, and later, a Mossad *kidon*. Shimmel is 6'7" and a wall of muscle, but he also was one of the IDF's most gifted tacticians. His pregnant wife and young daughter were killed by a car bomb set by Tariq Houmaz.

**Ann Silbee.** Homeless teenager living in the tunnels under Manhattan.

**Jon Sommers.** Call-sign Quicksilver, aka Friedrich Stamphil. Mossad *katsa* working for Ruth Cohen. A year ago, Jon was recruited by Yigdal Ben-Levy after Jon's fiancée, Lisa Gabriel, died in a car bombing.

**Abel Sommerstein.** Jon Sommers' father.

**Natasha Sommerstein.** Jon Sommers' mother.

**Sandhia Sorab.** Funds Transfer Repair Station Specialist at the Bank of Trade, Karachi, Pakistan.

**Herr Rickard Stossler.** A cover identity for Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Shimon Tennenbaum.** A Mossad *kidon* who works for Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Nikita Tobelov.** Head of Russian Mafiya's Eastern District, in Vladivostok

**Benjamin Franklin Wagner.** US Ambassador to Israel.

**Phillip Watson.** Graduate student at working in the Technology Centre of the University of London.

**JD "Jacob David" Weinstein.** A Mossad *kidon* who works for Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**Ari Westheim.** A Mossad *kidon* who works for Yigdal Ben-Levy.

**William Wing.** Call-sign CryptoMonger. Hacker, living in Hong Kong, contract worker for corporations, MI-6, the Mossad, and other intelligence services. He was disowned by his father when he was twelve years old, for hacking into the CSIS servers.

**Xian Wing.** Director of Chinese Security Information Systems (CSIS).  
Father of William Wing.

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## **Appendix C**

### **Agency Dossier, Cassandra Sashakovich (copy found by Sashakovich on Pesì Houmaz's computer)**

**NAME: Cassandra Sashakovich**

AGE: 28

DATE OF BIRTH: May 19, 1983

EDUCATION:

Half Moon Bay High School, Academic Diploma 1998

California Culinary Institute, No Degree, 2002

New York University, BA, Economics, minor in  
Computer Science, 2006

Stanford University, Ph. D. Economics, 2008

PLACE OF BIRTH: San Mateo, CA

CALLSIGN: Swiftshadow

COVER NAME: Chrissie Card

COVER PROFESSION: Staff Economist,  
Brewster Jennings and Associates, Boston, MA

LANGUAGES: Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, Pashto, and Dari

COVER CONTROL: Mark McDougal, Assistant Director

**!!!! BURN NOTICE !!!!**

### **COVER ASSIGNMENTS AND CONSULTING WORK:**

6/2008 Trained in basic intelligence and counterintelligence at The Farm

8/2008 Trained in Farsi, Pashto, Arabic, and Hebrew

1/2009 Developed MAPEMIN Forecasting Procedures

4/2009 Attempted basic forecasts to prove MAPEMIN effectiveness, using US GNP, Balance of Payments, and Agency Budget. FAILED, but procedure shows promise

8/2009 Modified MAPEMIN, successfully forecasted US GNP, Balance of Payments, and Agency Budget.

Assigned to Brewster Jennings and Associates satellite office in Washington, DC

10/2009 Toured Middle East embassies, introduced to Ambassadors and local staffs

11/2009 Developed GNP forecast for National Bank of Afghanistan

2/2010 Refined MAPEMIN for second stage forecast

5/2010 Developed Consumer Sales forecast for Saudi Arabian Central Bank

Rendered \$1.78 million from Al-Zil Muslim extremist organization

8/2010 Further refined MAPEMIN to reduce forecasting errors to below 2% for macro factors

11/2010 Developed Electric Power forecast for Abu Dhabi Rendered \$2.5 million from Houmaz branch of Al Qaeda

12/2010 Trained at Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Advanced Middle Eastern Culture

2/2011 Riyadh, Electric Energy Demand Forecast; Rendered \$2.5 million from Indonesian Fundamentalist Muslim extremists

2/2011 Cover blown, attempted assassination by Houmaz, Murdered assassin in self-defense, Employment terminated.

**!!!! BURN NOTICE !!!!**

## **CHARACTERISTICS:**

### **STRENGTHS**

- o Work Capabilities
- o Econometric forecasting

- o Computer Hacking
- o Global Banking Security Countermeasures
- o Language Capabilities (all fluent)
- o Pashto
- o Arabic
- o Farsi
- o Urdu
- o Hebrew
- o Russian
- o Excellent swimmer
- o Learns very fast, adjusts to changing circumstances with creativity  
—capable of promotion to management level at the agency

## WEAKNESSES

- o Has habitual locations:
- o Vacations at expensive hotels, eats at expensive restaurants
- o Attends blues festivals
- o Plays an expensive guitar
- o Bare basic self-defense skills
- o Drinks wine and single-malt scotch
- o Driven by emotions, including strong sense of guilt
- o Pride in work
- o Unable to relinquish control
- o Possible sex addiction, special sensitivity in nipples possibly to compensate for small breasts

**!!!! BURN NOTICE !!!!**

## CONTROL'S NOTES:

10/14/2009 – Cassandra Sashakovich is the most determined and inflexible operative I've ever had to control. She often pays little attention to my requests, violates agency protocols, and often puts herself in danger without thinking about the consequences. She is a very frustrating agent to control. Most specifically, she has violated local customs regarding what is

considered proper for females in Muslim culture. However, despite these extensive and potentially dangerous weaknesses, her abilities and creativity have enabled her to become one of the most sought-after operatives we have. Her computer hacking skills are by far the best I have ever seen. Her financial forecasting abilities are better than any I know of in the private sector. Her knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of global banking are unrivaled. She has shown herself to be a very fast learner in acquiring new languages.

5/12/2010 – Sashakovich continues to improve her skills. She is the most focused agent we have. I recommend she be given time to improve her self-defense skills, since we have heard several Muslim extremist organizations now suspect her of removing funds from their bank accounts. Unfortunately, this will be difficult, since we now have her backlogged for several urgent assignments.

3/2/2011 – With the concurrence of agency Director Gilbert Greenfield, I terminated Sashakovich's employment for cause. She committed the crime of murder in Saudi Arabia, ignored agency protocol, and insulted local culture. I am sorely disappointed with her behavior. She showed a complete lack of maturity in her sexual behavior, in a culture which could find many reasons to execute her for her crimes in country. She will be monitored by the agency to ensure no information regarding agency operations can be taken from her. If any attempt is made to extradite her to Saudi Arabia, Director Greenfield had consented to terminating her using US-based agency black ops contractors.

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## Appendix D

### **Cassie's Original Draft of the Plan to Survive (written on the bus during her escape from Washington, DC, taken from her cell phone)**

“Swiftshadow Consulting Group

1. Where it provides an advantage, act like a Muslim extremist. Start by changing my identity. Need plenty of alternates. Need to change my face ASAP, therefore, see a plastic surgeon. Need the ability to plant someone else's fingerprints and DNA by gathering those from others who are unlikely to have ever been put into any system. Maybe school children? I could be a substitute teacher for a week or two.
2. My first clients would naturally be those I have worked with before, since they know the quality of my work, and couldn't have sold me out since they knew me only under my cover identity, while the assassin knew my real name. But the agency may leak my separation from them and tell them it wasn't voluntary. Will there be any that will take me?
3. Can't meet face to face with clients. Too dangerous. I need a secure anonymous Internet website host with embedded email capabilities, paid for through several financial blinds.
4. To minimize chance of being found by those wanting to kill me, any travel must be via bus, freight train, or if overseas, then by freighter. No airports, ever.
5. Learn survival skills and improve my martial arts skills; the agency's training course might not be enough.
6. Find places where I can stash new identities and cash when I must leave the area without advance warning. Maybe a locker at a bus terminal?
7. Ultimate goals are to find and eliminate those who want me dead. That means kill them and all the direct links to them. How to do this?

8. Find the bastards at the agency that blew my cover and fix them so they are worse than merely dead. Has to be someone in the analysis section, such as Gault, McDougal, Greenfield, or Ainsley. But who? And what if I'm wrong and it's someone else? What if it's an operative in the black section?
9. I need a fallback plan in case everything fails. If I can't gain safety by elimination of whoever wants me dead—Houmaz, Hezbollah, Hamas, or Fatah—I'll just hack a retirement fund from the Houmaz bank account for myself, change my identity, slip away and hide forever, someplace tropical and quiet.”

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## Appendix E

### **Cassie's Original Draft of the Plan to Eliminate the Houmaz Organization (written just before joining forces with Lee Ainsley, taken from her cell phone)**

#### Set-up Phase

- Software staff recruitment, software development and testing
  - Recruit Lee (as “director”) and two hacking team leaders—one for banks and one for sat telecom hardware and software.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, Lee, and two agency hacks.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 2 months for development and one month for testing.
  - Precursor event: none.
  - Is precursor to: Arming the Trap and Springing the Trap.
- Recruit attack team leaders
  - Recruit three attack team leaders for Riyadh covert op.
  - Recruit one breaking-and-entering team leader.
  - Staffing required: Cassie and Lee, who is the first recruit.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 month.
  - Precursor event: Recruit Lee.
  - Is precursor to: all subsequent phases and their tasks.
- Obtain materiel and recruit team personnel
  - 100 retired agency staff and military mercenaries.
  - 100 Kevlar vests.
  - 100 Ruger Mini-14s modified automatic handguns and AGENCY ISSUED AMMO.

- 100 satellite phones for covert use.
- Two satellite transponders with radio-oriented beachball antennas.
- Staffing required: Cassie.
- Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 month.
- Precursor event: Recruit attack team leaders.
- Is precursor to: all other tasks in this phase and all other phases.
- Organize sub-teams and assign tasks
  - Determine talents and skills of all team members.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, all recruits.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 week.
  - Precursor event: Recruit attack team leaders.
  - Is precursor to: all other tasks in this phase and all other phases.
- Plan armed attacks
  - Riyadh.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, attack team leaders.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 10 days.
  - Precursor event: Organize sub-teams and assign tasks.
  - Is precursor to: Training Phase.
- Plan software hacks and telecom interruptions
  - Staffing required: Cassie, hack team leaders.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 2 weeks.
  - Precursor event: Organize sub-teams and assign tasks.
  - Is precursor to: Training Phase.

Training Phase (all tasks in this phase can be conducted concurrently)

- Train armed forces
  - Staffing required: Cassie, attack team leaders and their organized

team members.

- Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 month.
- Precursor event: all Set-up phase tasks.
- Is precursor to: Arming the Trap.
- Train hacking force
  - Staffing required: Cassie, hack team leaders and members.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 month.
  - Precursor event: all Set-up phase tasks.
  - Is precursor to: Arming the Trap.

### Arming the Trap

- Execute bank hacks
  - Discover who the agency mole is.
  - Move all funds from Muslim extremist current accounts to agency mole's bank account.
  - Move half the mole's money to an unrelated numbered account for later use and distribution.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, hack team leaders and members.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 week.
  - Precursor event: Training Phase (all tasks).
  - Is precursor to: Plant false evidence trail.
- Plant false evidence trail
  - Copy and modify bank records for all executed transactions.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, hack team leaders and members for electronic records, and Cassie, attack team leaders and members for physical paper records.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 3 days to one week.
  - Precursor event: Execute bank hacks.

- Is precursor to: Springing the trap phase.
- Take local delivery of materiel
  - Arms.
  - Armor (Kevlar vests, etc).
  - Ammo.
  - Vehicles.
  - One location; Riyadh.

### Springing the trap

- Execute telecom interruptions
  - Prior to attack on Muslim extremist locations, need to ensure no reinforcements can be called up.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, hack team leaders and members.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 to 2 days.
  - Precursor event: Plant false evidence trail.
  - Is precursor to: Launch attacks.
- Launch attacks
  - Covert, silent physical attack on Muslim extremist organization within Riyadh city and Upper Pachir, with objective being no survivors left alive.
  - Staffing required: Cassie, attack team leaders and members.
  - Estimated calendar time to completion: 1 day maximum.
  - Precursor event: Springing the trap.
  - Is precursor to: Final meeting with agency mole (with me killing the mole).

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## About the Author



D. S. KANE is the name the author has chosen to write under. He worked in the field of covert intelligence for over a decade. During that time, he traveled globally for clients including government and military agencies, the largest banks, and Fortune 100 corporations. One of the banks he investigated housed the banking assets of many of the world's intelligence agencies and secret police forces, including the CIA and NSA. Much of his work product was pure but believable fiction, lies he told, and truths he concealed.

Now, he's a retired spy, still writing fiction. Through his novels, he exposes the way intelligence agencies craft fiction for sale to sway their countries and manipulate their national policy, driving countries into dangerous conflicts.

He's been published under his real name many times in financial trade journals on topics including global banking, computer fraud and countermeasures, financial forecasting, global electronic-funds transfer networks, and corporate finance, including one book on finance published by a major publisher. He has been a featured speaker at financial conferences and conventions. His children's book, *A Teenager's Guide to Money, Banking and Finance*, was published in 1987 by Simon & Schuster. He was once the CEO of an eBook publishing company and writes a blog

(<http://dskane.com>) on topics that include new technology, politics, and the future of publishing.

He has been guest lecturer at the Whidbey Island MFA program, and also teaches a course at the Muse Online Writers Conference entitled Covert Training and Covert Operations for Fiction Writers, and one on a similar topic at California libraries, funded by a federal grant. He has taught a thriller-writing course at the Pikes Peak Writers Conference and was a featured speaker at a dinner meeting of the California Writers Club. He taught finance at the Stern Graduate Business School of New York University for over ten years, and is one of the co-founders of ActFourWriters.com, a unique email-based novelists' critique group (<http://www.actfourwriters.com>). His website can be found at <http://dskane.com>. He can be found at [@DSKaneThriller](#) on Twitter and at [www.facebook.com/DSKaneAFormerSpyStillTellingLies](http://www.facebook.com/DSKaneAFormerSpyStillTellingLies).

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