

The Liberty Bomb

Copyright By Gary L Morton

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*About this Book: Private investigator Joe Holiday follows a dangerous case involving a mix of Islamic terrorists, Satanists and intelligence agencies. The novel is a suspense novel with a comedic aspect.

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Chapter One: Terrorists Come to Town

A hazy fall afternoon surfaced. It was gray and anonymous. The city felt like a safe space, but one that would deflate as soon as something rude arrived to disturb the stagnant air.

On the waterfront, Joe Holiday walked out of the Amsterdam Brew House and went for a stroll along the damp boardwalk. His girlfriend, Josie, had left on a plane earlier in the day, so his thoughts were of some long, boring days ahead. He would be indoors, absorbed in investigative work, most of the time.

Halting, he looked out at the lake for a while and thought it over. The sound of a cellphone and the heavy footsteps of another man ended the peace, so Joe left the railing and walked away from the irritating man. As he headed uptown, he had no idea that the ringtone he was escaping signaled the beginning of events that would be far from boring.

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The cellphone rang again in its shrill, penetrating ringtone, much unlike the soft and slimy voice of the big man that answered it. This was the voice of a man who always had spittle on his lips and a thick tongue that slowed the words.

The call was encrypted and from Saudi Arabia. The caller spoke in terse words in English. His accent was barely detectable. "Andras, you didn't get the men past the interview stage. I don't think it matters."

"It matters to me, Bilal. It would be much better that way, doing things the easy way and avoiding the rough stuff."

"Listen, Andras. We wanted your company inside, but it isn't necessary if you succeed with the others."

"True. They bought the resumes, but there is a roadblock. The phone interviews went well. So did the interview with the personnel director. He is a man who likes to be called by his first name, Johan. He told our three men he was hiring them, but something went wrong. Someone blocked him. We heard that the company has an investigator checking people out. Someone private they use for background checks. I will get the name. We need this guy out of the way to get inside clean."

"Okay, but you said you cracked into the company files. Personnel files and some other vital documents weren't present. That means you need to grab that personnel director. He keeps the personnel files somewhere. Maybe vaulted in electronic storage or somewhere in the cloud. Once you have that Johan fellow, then you use his access to make any needed changes to those files. You can also get the name of the investigator."

"Yeah, everyone is getting smarter these days. Corporations expect hackers and have security workarounds, so that all you get is useless information. If I take this personnel director, it can't be messy. We do not want to arouse suspicion. I'll give you an update before I erase him. However, that won't likely be necessary for a while. I have ways of making people cooperate. Using him would be a plus. The story is different with the investigator, whoever it is. That person registers as way too smart. I'll make him disappear. If it turns out to be a woman, we'll have some fun doing it. But I'm almost certain it is a man. Perhaps we'll find an inventive way to off him. Something that will confuse the police. We've used that strategy before, and it works better than simply disappearing someone. The police always dig into disappearances, but not on strange cases they can't comprehend."

"We have some lovely ladies who will arrive soon to join the men. They are part of the cover. You'll receive a text on it soon."

"I want to clear up this small problem before dealing with that."

"Okay. Get on it. Send in an estimate on the expenses. Money isn't a problem. We are going to punish Canada for daring to meddle in Arab affairs. We promised it, and it will be done. Do this right, and you'll be very rich."

Andras clicked off his cell phone, ending the connection with the Saudi. He used the name Bilal, a cover identity. Andras wondered who he really was ... maybe someone high up in the Saudi elite. This person had organized and funded successful missions in the past. Unfortunately, for him, this one would be successful in a way he would never expect. He decided to head home and do some planning. The other operations had been in the USA, but this one was right at home. To protect the endgame, he would have to be more careful.

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Andras looked around the bunker, and he meant to sigh, but it came out as a wheeze followed by a cough. He'd been feeling great, and now the damn lung condition had to return with maximum irritation. Another thing that irritated him was the painting of Hitler on the wall across from him. It reminded him of his past and the senseless violence of it. Back then, he'd been a bit like a brown-shirt thug, though not right-wing or a Nazi type. Nowadays, he had goals, and as a Luciferian, he was motivated by a larger vision. The Nazi setup of the room was temporary, just to fool some terrorist guests. They were Muslims, extremists. He despised them. They made the most brutal Nazis look civilized in comparison. The mere thought of them turned his stomach, but there would be pleasure in deceiving then destroying them. A faint smile came to his lips. He took a big slug of beer and shouted for his right-hand man. The spray of spittle gave Hitler a wash.

A tall man came through the curtain and sat quietly beside Andras. His features were classic Arab and complemented his modern style of dress, neat haircut, and whisker shadow. "Andras, do you have to call me Jalal all the time? I've been called Jay since I was a kid."

"It's for the benefit of our guests. Don't forget that your role is in being a cultural bridge between them and us. They see Jalal as a man with similar extremist beliefs. They must continue to believe your Western look is merely a disguise. You've done an excellent job so far. I worry more that they will see through me."

"No way. They haven't seen through you. You disgust them, but they have respect for you because they think you hate this society just as they do. They definitely believe you are an honest sponsor who thinks he somehow benefits from terrorism. Don't be offended, but sometimes you even convince me that you are a right-wing Nazi kook."

Andras chuckled. "By the way, what in the fuck are their names again?"

"Their names are Shahlah, Mahir, and Muhab."

"Stupid fucking names. What about the big white one with the red hair? How does he get a name like Dahir?"

"You mean Mahir. He's really Randy White. He converted to Islam a dozen years ago, and he's a veteran of terrorist wars. He's been over there so long, he's more Muslim than some of the natives. Long slow torture and street combat are his specialties."

"Ah, and he somehow missed his trip to the Muslim Valhalla."

"He won't be missing it this time."

"True enough. Okay. Turn him back into Randy White. I remember now. That is the Western name on the doctored papers our government contact created. Shave that stupid red ring beard off him and change his clothes. He's not to wear that ridiculous Muslim cap anymore. And get some clothes for them."

"Sure, I was getting to that anyway. I did get them clothes for the job interview, but they changed back out of them. I'll tell them we are underway. They use their Western names and Western dress only from now on."

"They seem sloppy. They're supposed to be pros."

Jalal laughed. "I've been having a great time since they came. I know how they think. I used to be Muslim, remember? I have also met their type before. They all look sloppy, but they get the job done."

"Make sure they don't find out you are a backsliding Muslim, or they might slit your throat."

"Just so you know, they believe that they are inherently superior to you, and that they are manipulating you for the cause. They think about the same of me, as I am not a veteran of terrorist wars. I would have said I was, but didn't want to be caught up in lies. They have ways of checking."

"Don't overrate them. They are three saps. They'll find out the hard way about our superiority."

"Sure. So let me get back to them and clean them up. One more thing. This invisible Canadian government contact. The Saudi provided it, but I don't like it. He cleared the men brought in and established IDs for them here. But we've never seen this guy. It must be someone powerful inside the security establishment, and those types of people can't be trusted."

Andras nodded. "Our friend Bilal told me not to worry about that. Their man on the inside here is interested only in money. Perhaps we should drink to fools and their money."

The two men tapped their beer bottles together for a toast. "Let's toast to something better. To the Fatherland," Jalal said. "On second thought, make that the Fatherland and Allah, as both are serving our purposes."

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A thundercloud broke, and rain pounded the junkyard. Johan woke, listening to it drum on tin and wood. He heard hard slaps like wet canvas continuously hitting the outside wall. Wet scrub scratched against the tiny slit window. A tree branch cracked in the wind, then a door slammed. Johan tensed. He didn't want his kidnapper to return. Given some time, he might figure out a way to escape. But he doubted it. He felt weak. He was about as far from being an action hero as a man could get. The idea that came to his mind was a victim. Soft and easy, and his captor despised him because of it. He'd seen it in his eyes, the look of a strange observer, owlish all-seeing weirdness.

The memory of those eyes startled him as much as the rattling rain outside. They were dark eyes filled with unrestrained moodiness. This sort of man might decide to do anything that popped into his head from the vast expanse of evil ideas filling his soul. Johan hadn't seen the man's face because of the ski mask, but he could picture it; apish and brutal, belonging to a member of some warped branch of humanity that was morally defective yet owning malignant intelligence.

The flashing light from the narrow window stung his bloodshot eyes. His head ached with pressure, and a feeling of being squeezed, and the humidity worsened. In the first minute, he remembered his captor but failed to recall key details of his own identity. That was bad, and when the pressure eased, and he did remember, it made it worse.

Johan knew this place was a junkyard. He'd gotten a brief glimpse of it while being dragged from the pickup. It had been warm and dry then, no rain or sign of it. So he'd been out cold for a while. Waking, being alive was unexpected; he'd been sure the man would finish him. What he didn't know was why the man had kidnapped him. It didn't add up. He had a soft job as personnel director for a large demolition firm. It had always been possible that someone would come after him, but it would be someone he knew. Someone he had fired. Someone the company had declared obsolete. Someone with nothing left but rage. There had been many angry people, but they hadn't returned with anything other than lawyers. Sometimes they found other high-paying work, but they usually followed a downward spiral that included booze, drugs, and defeat.

He didn't know this man. He was certain he'd never met him. He was not the sort that would be one of their employees. This man had been wearing a ski mask, but no disguise could hide the things that made him distinct: the twisted mouth that the mask had failed to hide, the limp, the deformed left arm, and his incredible brute strength. Johan screened people like him out, unless they got in as the janitor or something. Perhaps he'd met another employer's requirements, an employer that wanted a hit man. It was common in the movies and in books, but it likely didn't happen in real life. Thinking it over didn't make him happy. It looked too easy for someone to make him disappear. And he knew the company brass. They'd rather see him buried and forgotten than get bad publicity in the news. He didn't trust cops either. They'd probably pull the spike out of his head and say he died of a coronary. Who'd want to spend money pursuing the killer of some obese white guy with a heart condition? He knew he wouldn't. He'd done rotten things himself to save money for the company. The most usual thing was to terminate people at the top of the pay scale, if they weren't invaluable.

It had all arrived unexpectedly, beginning at the DQ Grill & Chill, which was about the safest place on earth to be ... located on the highway just inside the city, on a long neon-bright strip lined with junk-food joints. There were gang and criminal neighborhoods, but they were to the north and the west. Too many fat cops pulled into the DQ for criminals to see it as a stomping ground. The food strip was beside a neighborhood where people earned enough to get fat and lazy and then die of a coronary. If they saw men in ski masks, it was dead cold outside, or a dream or a movie. And unfortunately, for Johan, he hadn't noticed the man in the mask until it was too late.

He had been sitting inside under nuclear-bright fluorescent lights, eating a bacon-cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate-extreme blizzard cake. It was a meal made so tasty by salt, sugar, and fat that the guilt about breaking his diet faded with the first bite. The only reason he noticed the battered old pickup pull in was that he'd been looking that way, glaring with disapproval at a black woman who glittered with five pounds of junk jewelry, and shook fifty pounds of jiggle as she tried to quiet her screaming brat child. I'll never look that bad, he had been thinking, patting his belly, and then he noticed the pickup pull in over by the closed-off patio, parking out by the road when there were spots right near the entrance. The back of it was loaded with improperly secured junk, and the vehicle looked in bad need of a safety check. The soot on it doubled as a paint job. He couldn't see the driver, just a shadow beyond the dirty windshield, and he didn't

get out. Since there was a white-trash neighborhood not too far off, Johan figured the driver would be from it. Maybe he'd just pulled into the lot to doze for a while. He didn't have to see him, and he forgot about him as he focused on his meal.

Now, with a battered head, he realized how stupid he had been. The creep had obviously tailed him, watched him, and he hadn't suspected a thing. He remembered stepping out of the DQ due to urgency, as the meal went down fast but not well. Just outside, he stepped left and released a gas bomb, followed by a balloon-bursting burp. Then his face reddened as he realized the black lady and her kid had stepped out behind him. He heard her cursing at him, but he didn't look back as he walked to his Cadillac Escalade.

It wasn't warm out, but being overweight and on blood-pressure medication that raised his body temperature caused him to sweat even in the fall. With the gas attack, he would leave all the windows open to spare the vehicle the torment of his body odors. At the car, he stopped and looked around. There was nothing to see except other fast-food places in the long highway lake of neon glare.

The new Five Guys Burgers & Fries was picking up business, and Church's Chicken and Steak'n Shake were absolutely killing the Golden Arches. He loved this neighborhood, but the night view was actually better from the Arches because he could see up and down the strip. Dunkin' Donuts, his favorite place, was across the road. The only residential part of the area he could actually see was the peak of a lonely house poking over the high wall running along the back of the DQ. But that didn't change his opinion. He knew the suburban houses were in there, and that the people who lived in them weren't the type that frowned at well-off white guys driving giant Cadillac SUVs.

He noticed the dusty pickup still parked there and wished the cops would pull in and chase the guy off. One of the great things about the strip was that there were no downtown panhandlers or street trash. But there were still trash people with money to buy junked vehicles. They were the mobile ones, the smarter ones. Even filth had its higher levels.

After starting the car, he noticed that he was low on fuel. Unfortunately, the vehicle was like its owner and had an appetite like Godzilla. Though Johan drove the priciest car, he fueled it at the cheapest guzzle place. The beast didn't work well on anything other than premium, and he didn't need an app on his phone to know Joey Joy's Petro Station always had the lowest price. That meant a trip slightly out of the neighborhood. He got well off the strip and followed a line of cars past the bungalows on Havelock before taking a left down Passmore Road. That took him past the edge of the white-trash area and into the fuel station.

Joey Joy's wasn't the classiest gas station. Out on the highways, they had monster stations that looked new and luxurious. Joey's looked more like he had made his own signage. Because he had some way of keeping prices lower, he drew enough big rigs off the highway to leave Passmore with potholes the size of craters, and combined with the bright yellow bug lights that he used even in winter when there were no bugs, it was like pulling into a station on the moon. None of this bothered Johan. The big vehicle could handle rough roads with ease. It certainly wasn't a Smart Car or like the rattling pickup behind him.

The sight of the pickup jolted him, as did a grinding pothole, and he swerved in and nearly hit the pumps. Totally pissed, he decided to let the attendant serve him while he glanced over at the pickup. It had pulled over by the repair garage at the back with its nose sticking out, so that was all he could see. He couldn't see the occupant, just the dark shadow of a man behind the windshield. Johan scratched his head. "Is that guy following me?" he wondered. "Naw, it can't be. Just a coincidence, maybe." Maybe it was the meal or that his mind was unable to register anything out of the ordinary, but he still let it pass, shrugging it off as nothing.

Johan tipped the attendant and had him dash in and grab him a pack of Kings. That took a long minute. As he waited, something buzzed through the air above his windshield. His eyes followed it, and he leaned over to the passenger side. "Huh," he sputtered. The thing was one of those drones. He'd seen them on TV but never around his neighborhood. He watched as the drone drifted around the side and landed in the back of the pickup, among junk.

"For Christ's sake," he said.

"Pardon me," said the boyish attendant. He held out the pack of Kings.

"Did you see that drone?"

"Yup."

"Who is that man in the pickup? Why is he flying a drone?"

The attendant looked over. "Don't know who he is. I'll deal with him in a minute."

"He gives you any trouble, call the police. I know his type, all no good."

As Johan pulled out, a big rattling rig came in. The attendant marched toward the pickup, but Johan's view was cut off. "Be nice to get a look at that man in the pickup," he thought. But getting back home was a bigger thought, so he horse-backed the Caddy through some killer potholes and headed for the shortcut down Everson Ave. He was a block away before he noticed the traffic jam ahead. Lights flashed from a police car and a roadblock at an accident scene ahead. Johan needed to swing around and get free. He would have to back up because he'd rolled too close to the Nissan ahead of him while looking at the accident.

The Caddy rocked from a hard brake; he checked the mirror just as a huge Chrysler did the same thing to him, nearly hitting his rear bumper.

Johan bellowed out the window. "Get off my ass, tailgater!" And he was in luck. The driver was an old, birdlike woman, and she quickly reversed and gave him room. As soon as Johan had backed off the Nissan's tail, he did a nasty turnaround of the sort where one drives right over the sidewalk. He turned onto the front lawn of a house and honked the horn so a group of kids coming up the sidewalk would get out of the way so he could get back on the road.

After narrowly avoiding a collision with a newspaper box, Johan escaped the scene and was soon breathing easy on Clarke Road. He breezed through a kilometer of dilapidated houses and stores before hitting a dark tract with closed industrial complexes on both sides of the road. He found it amazing the way the city could locate

hidden pockets of the Rust Belt amid mostly wealthy areas. But Clarke was okay, as it was a shortcut. People weren't coming here; they were either escaping the area or being stamped as obsolete as jobs went to China and wouldn't be coming back. He figured a final phase of decay was necessary before refurbishment. It always happened that way. And he was still figuring that when a drone buzzed his windshield.

Johan swerved out into the other lane and was lucky that nothing was coming. The drone dipped in front of him again, but he held steady, checked the mirror, and spotted the pickup behind him. Johan flipped his cell phone into the dashboard holder. It was just a matter of getting the guy's plate number and, if possible, a description of him, and calling it in to the police. Things were working out. He got a partial plate right away, and then the drone distracted him as it flew right in front of the windshield. It hung there for a moment, then it dropped something it had been carrying – a paint bomb that immediately obscured his vision and caused him to swerve off the road. Luck was with him initially as he hit the drive-in to one of the derelict warehouse complexes, then it turned against him as he went off the edge into a weed-filled ditch. Gravel, earth, and scrub scuffed the left headlight and fender as he came to a sudden stop.

The airbag didn't deploy, but the long scrape had definitely done solid damage to the car. Enough to take Johan's road rage to the max. The Cadillac was on a tilt. He managed to open the door, squeeze out, and rush to the top of the ditch. He figured that the pickup had fled and he'd be stuck raging at the darkness. But it was there. It had pulled over quickly, and the sight of it caused him to throw his fists in the air. 'Motherfucker!' he shouted as he charged forward. As fast as he did that, a man emerged from the vehicle, and Johan saw a ski mask, a crooked arm, and the iron bar that hit him and put him out cold.

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The rain continued to pour. Johan's head hurt. He felt a raw goose egg on the left side and a big scab of congealed blood and matted hair. He wondered if the bastard had wanted the Cadillac. He could see through a tiny sliver of cracked glass. Rain danced in a junkyard. This place was a shack, and even the window was mostly boarded over and covered with tin. He wasn't bound, but he was unsteady on his feet. He got to the door and tried it. Locked but with some play. He could tell by the feel that a solid bolt held it from the outside. All trying to get through the window or door would do was make a nasty noise and alert the man.

If this were about the car, the kidnapper was probably going to kill him. It would be the best way to make sure he didn't go to the police, and the man probably thought he had the plate number for the pickup. The Cadillac was present; he could see it parked out there by a stack of old drums. Judging from the big scrape down its side, it was hurting as much as his head.

Everything out there looked old and rotten. There were weeds, mud with fast-food containers and cans trampled into it, another hut-like structure with peeling paint and miscellaneous items bursting out of an open door. Even if he got out of this shack, escaping would be difficult. Just over the highest mound of junk, he saw tree branches

spilling over a tall board fence. Rusted posts at the top of each section of fence were strung with barbed wire.

Humidity, stress ... sweat poured down Johan's brow. He swept it off, then it got worse because he heard slow heavy footsteps approaching ... the crunch of a can, a rattle of tin. Then the footsteps went right past and faded in the sound of the rain. He wondered how a place like this could exist. The company he hired for was a demolition outfit, one of the biggest in the nation. They brought the old down to dust and made way for the new. The whole point of it was to make sure trash lots and derelict buildings didn't blight the landscape from sea to sea. But from what he could see just looking through a tiny crack, it looked like maybe the trash and rubble of all those places had been hauled and stored here.

He went back to the door. It was fastened tight, but he could tell that the wood was somewhat rotten. If his captor was far off, he might be able to tear it open, ease out, and work on an escape. With so much junk, there were probably hiding places in it. He could use many things as a weapon. That was certain. Bashing the masked creep's head in with a rusty pipe would be sweet. Johan could picture it – blood and rust, a plump dead body in the wash of the rain.

He began to work on the door; the rotten wood seemed about to give, so he leaned into it and threw all of his weight into his shoulder, producing a big crack as the door flew open. The hasp and lock flew into the mud, and he staggered into it as well and then caught his balance. He looked up and around him. A figure stepped into view, dark and evil. The same guy, still wearing a black ski mask. His feet slopped forward in the mud. He wore big rubber boots, he lifted the large object he was carrying, and it roared with sound. A chainsaw ... Johan staggered back and nearly fell over in the mud. He was so terrified that he ran back inside the shack and cowered.

As fast as it had started, the chainsaw shut off, and the masked man stepped into the doorway.

"Who ... who the fuck are you?" Johan said.

The man answered without hesitation. "I'm what you call a terrorist. You are now working for me."

"But ... but, you don't look like a terrorist."

"Really. Then what do I look like?"

"A serial killer, a psycho maybe."

"What, a serial killer? Why, you piece of shit. I'll show you."

Johan cowered with his back pressed to the wall. He didn't know what to say. The masked man's eyes had turned black, almost like he was demon-possessed. He saw evil in them but not rage. He'd put the chainsaw aside and now pulled something from his coat. Johan expected a pistol and to be shot, but the item the man took out looked like a cross between a glue gun and a hairdryer. It didn't look like a weapon, but it had a scary plunger handle, like it was some kind of medical tool. It would look plain silly to someone not being threatened by it, but Johan wasn't laughing. As the man stepped forward, he shook so badly he went to his knees. Then he was seized, his head forced

down, and he heard a whir and a snap and felt a sharp pain like a bee sting in the back of his neck.

The device had injected something that felt like a needle into the back of his neck. Johan expected to get dizzy and die, and as the man stepped back from him, he waited for it to happen. But it didn't happen. He remained on his knees, like a pussy, with a bee sting in the back of his neck. He hated the man in the mask more than he hated anything in the world. People had never pushed Johan around. He had fired people just for getting smart. Sometimes just for the fun of it. He'd thought of himself as big and brash, but the man in the mask had put the lie to that ... he'd revealed Johan as a coward, the biggest wuss in the world. It was almost as bad as dying, maybe worse because his pride had been crushed, and with it, his balls.

Still on his knees, Johan held out trembling hands. He wanted to say something, but couldn't. The masked man's eyes studied him, and then, without warning, he raised a boot and did a flat kick to Johan's shoulder. His head snapped back against the wall, and though it didn't hit hard, terror overwhelmed him, and he blacked out.

Strange, indecipherable dreams swept Johan through disturbed sleep. From time to time, a masked man appeared in those dreams, and he struggled to wake but could not do so. Each time the image of the masked man repeated, it grew bigger and more terrifying, and the man began to lean into him, twisted lips moving as if he were trying to say something. The words came out garbled and ugly, growing in volume until he finally woke. He was on his back, and he shot up with a start and spat out some foul saliva.

It was daytime, a very warm day for the fall, and he was alone and in a strange place. Initially, he felt great relief knowing that the masked man wasn't real. It was a relief that faded quickly as his memory slowly returned. He looked around and wondered. Had he somehow escaped or been rescued? He remembered the bee sting, the kick, and blacking out. His vision was still blurry but returning. A tentative hand to his face revealed some minor swelling. He felt a coarse bandage stuck to the back of his neck and saw a big black bruise on his arm.

There was no pain; he felt almost like he was floating. Nausea hit suddenly, and he was sick. When he turned his head to vomit, only drool emerged. He went back down on his back, his chest heaving, and then he slowly rose, got to his knees, and looked around. He was outside on a strange patio, a large one all done in big and broken white stones jig-sawed together. A flat, rain roof held up by enormous wood posts covered the entire patio, and he could smell the fragrance of cedar. Oddly, he was outside yet completely enclosed. A stone fireplace was directly ahead, and a larger stone wall rose behind it. It was a tall wall that disappeared up into foliage and overhanging deciduous trees. On his right side, the patio ended at some sparse grass, tall weeds, and another segment of the high wall. On his left, an untrimmed and impenetrable hedge grew. It was thick, dense, and not manicured.

That left only the area behind him, and he stood and turned. He hadn't seen any people yet, so he was sure that when he turned, his nightmare would be renewed. But it wasn't, not yet. No one was on the patio with him, but there didn't seem to be a way out either, as that was walled off by three enormous mounds of rubbish. They rose higher than the patio roof and were all stone and metal scrap. They were junkyard mounds. The metal

mound was the kind you would find at a recycling center, created after stripping autos, fridges, stoves, and other discarded items, then tossing the worthless steel into a humongous rusting pile. The second pile was made of broken cinder blocks and other less valuable stone. An even bigger heap sat beyond the first two, and vines grew through and over most of it, locking it in place so that it was solid and unmovable. A distant din came to his ears, industrial sounds and machinery at work far beyond the mounds.

A huge eight-foot slab of polished white pine resting on two wide bases of stone and mortar made a table at the center of the patio. The chairs at it were all sturdy, functional wood, though they would not be comfortable. He noticed a rotary fan up in the wooden roof and a small aluminum fridge set into the stone wall that held the fireplace.

If he was being held prisoner, this didn't seem like an ideal place, but when he thought of escaping, his mind drew a blank. The high wall seemed insurmountable. The hedge or thicket was of a thorny type that would rip him up. He could try to climb the mounds of junk very carefully. However, if that was the easy way out, there would almost certainly be some other obstacles on the other side. He remembered the drone and his kidnapper's cleverness. That sort of man would probably enjoy an escape attempt and hunting him down, killing off his hopes at the last moment.

Johan sighed with weariness, worry, and pain. He felt like a piece of crap, and there was no way out. It was amazing that his heart had not failed. Pacing back and forth, he watched the wall, expecting his captor to come over it, black mask and all. Five minutes passed, then something unexpected happened. Part of the patio floor by the adjacent wall simply lifted, a mechanical arm opening a trap door that raised and rested against the wall. Johan stared fearfully at the dark rectangle as a man emerged.

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The fact that the man wasn't wearing a mask brought some relief. Johan was standing over by the fireplace at the back wall, and his hand inched toward the heavy poker beside it. He could tell the man had come upstairs, and a full view of him aroused mystery and fear. The man wore black boots, black leather pants, and a styled black polo shirt. He had Arab features but was neither handsome nor repulsive. His appearance came across as somewhat odd – a long, brooding face, heavy whisker shadow, and calculating brown eyes. Johan read him as more of a modern counterculture type of person, probably Western-born or educated.

The man definitely showed no fear, and his English was sophisticated with just a touch of British in his accent. His words were confident. "Don't even think about grabbing that poker. Andras is ready to speak to you now. My name is Jalal. Be assured that you will never forget either of our names. Follow me, his bunker is below."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," Johan said. As he finished the words and started walking, he realized he'd become as pathetic as a dog trying to please an abusive master. Even though his mind automatically tried to rationalize his behavior as necessary for survival, he knew he was broken, and the only question now was what personal hell he would find down at the bottom of his groveling and cowardice.

It wasn't dark but dim on the steep stairs, and they went down an amazing 20 feet. The entry hatch automatically closed as he neared the bottom. It locked into place with a solid thud, like the heaviest coffin lid on earth had closed on him, but he soon saw that this was no coffin or root cellar. The area at the bottom was about twenty feet square with a treated concrete floor and brick walls. A single caged tube light lit it. Two gray-painted heavy metal doors were set in the far wall, and Johan didn't feel good about where they might lead. He pictured a ghouls' dungeon similar to the one in a recent horror flick.

Jalal sensed his unease and obviously enjoyed it. He glanced at Johan and said. "Door number one is where we are entering. Just hope that you never find yourself behind door number two in the workshop with our terrorist guests."

Door number one didn't open automatically, and it wasn't locked. Jalal pulled it open with a large ring handle and waved Johan through ahead of him. He entered a bright interior that felt like an enormous bunker converted into living quarters. It reminded him of a gargantuan trailer home he had once toured. The trailer had been a long rectangle, with a front porch leading to the kitchen, and all the other rooms along its length. Smaller rooms with doors were left and right of a hallway running down the center. The difference here was that this place was an enormous tube and not a rectangle. It was like being inside a giant pipe with everything laid out to accommodate the tube design. An aisle ran down the center, where the top of the tube reached about nine feet. The tube walls were painted concrete. This first section was reminiscent of a train car with storage racks, coat hangers, and a welcome mat. The image embossed in the welcome mat was that of an eagle and a swastika. A form of dispersed light lit this first section, and Johan looked up and saw tiny LED lights embedded in the ceiling. They were a very low-power form of light, and that led him to believe that this whole structure was built on an efficient survivalist model.

Johan was about to take off his shoes, but Jalal told him to follow, so he did so. The second section was like a larder with more storage for all kinds of goods. Beyond it, they passed through an area with large silver boxes, which he guessed were part of the air conditioning. A fourth room had been set up with bunk beds on either side of the tube. The fifth segment was a long lounge. It had two overstuffed couches on one side, facing a media setup, and a bookcase on the other. It had a mounted TV, sound system, laptop computers, and a bunch of other electronic devices built into the shelving. They were all state-of-the-art components that no one would expect to find at the bottom of a junk yard. Many small sculptured items were on the shelves, in ebony, black, jade, and carved woods. These carvings and idols were all of an occult nature. The embedded gems in a few of them looked real.

Two people were reclining on one of the couches, and they appeared to be expecting him. Johan felt somewhat uplifted by the fact that they looked relaxed. He'd expected a dungeon, and it had become a strange, forced social call. Some confidence returned because he now felt that they weren't going to kill him. They needed him for something. Whatever that was, he would play it to the maximum. Perhaps he could get himself out of this mess and even gain from it. A deal with the devil would be preferable to the wrath of the devil.

The flooring was all parquet, but the tone here had shifted to black, which the white tube walls highlighted. A black velvet curtain blocked the areas beyond this one, but he could see that the deeper in one went, the more it shifted from everyday to mysterious. Two occult paintings were at the end of the room by the curtain. The first was a vision of hell, and the second a stylized print of Hitler. Johan believed they were prints of classic paintings, but he knew almost nothing about art. Perhaps one of the two people on the couch was an artist. He knew the big man seated was in fact the man in the mask. Removing it hadn't taken away his brutish appearance. The deformed but functional arm was still there, as were the twisted lips. Without the mask, his features coalesced into meanness. He had the rude boss-man look even while reclining, and he had drawn Johan's attention to such a degree that he almost failed to notice any details about the woman. Those details now entered his mind like a sudden realization. If a burst of light, it was black light. She had short-styled black hair, thin lips painted black, and green eyes that were evil eyes. She took him in with a glance and saw him as an insect. He knew that instinctively, though he wasn't quite sure how. Her dress was simple, a short one-piece black dress over skin as pale as ivory. She wore rings, bracelets, and a necklace with an occult goat's head thing he'd seen before somewhere. This woman was slim and almost sculpted; his eyes lingered on perfect knees, legs, and feet in sandals. Almost like an object, in her own way, she was as perfect as one of the sculptured figures on the shelves. She was a human demon, and she probably had some control over the brute next to her. He knew that man was Andras, but couldn't begin to guess what he wanted with him.

"Sit down, both of you," Andras said, and he beckoned Johan to sit next to him. Johan obeyed, and for some reason, he felt better sitting next to Andras. The woman struck him as deadly in some mysterious way. The reason for comfort beside Andras could not have been his voice, as it was a strange wheeze. He sounded like there were snakes in his vocal cords, and perhaps he suffered from a lung disease or asthma that had scarred his voice.

Jalal stepped past him and Andras to sit beside the woman, and he did it hypnotically as if she had him under his spell ... or all of them under a spell, because no one said anything for thirty seconds. Images of a foreign war played on the silent TV screen. Andras watched with interest as men with automatic rifles and rocket launchers sparred with a hidden enemy on a city street reduced to rubble. The enemy appeared racing up the street in two cars, the first blowing up at a barricade, forcing the fighters to retreat. The second car's suicide bomber didn't make it to the Muslim Valhalla via suicide because a shot from a rocket launcher turned his racing car into a rising fireball.

Andras turned to Johan. "It's an underground video. There is lots of it that the media never shows."

"Looks almost like an action movie," Johan said. "I don't keep up with wars over there. It's all war."

Andras nodded. "Most people don't. You should, because eventually the battle will come over here. Nevertheless, for my purposes, you work fine. A man without political passion is needed."

When Johan didn't answer, he gestured toward the shelves and a tray of drinks. "I know you like American beer, grab yourself a cold can."

Johan shrugged and said, "Sure." His parched throat required a bottle of water a lot more, but why argue with the host.

Andras went through a throat-clearing exercise, and he apparently needed it because when he spoke again, his voice gained some bass and depth. "You've worked for Cusac Demolitions for a long time, haven't you?"

"I slogged out ten years there. It's the only real job I've ever had."

"Sure, but they aren't paying a real salary, are they?"

"You must be psychic. You know how it is. As head of personnel, I interview and screen candidates, and they make pay I can only envy. Usually, they are experts of one sort or another. The big jobs are all different, and they have to be precise. We don't want people to get killed in one of our demolitions."

"Of course not. But you underestimate yourself. You can earn big bucks, too. I mean, if we pay it."

"I see. I mean, I see you must have money to own this bunker and that junkyard out there."

"That's not a junkyard, it's my recycling business, and I don't have big bucks. Take rich Arabs like the Saudis. How much money would you guess they have?"

"More than I could imagine."

"You are going to hire some of their people for some work and aid us on a secret demolition job. You will receive payment in offshore accounts we create for you. Only you will be able to draw from them. The first payment of twenty-five thousand dollars has been deposited into one account. Does this work for you?"

"Yes, twenty-five thousand dollars works for me. I need the money. I mean, I hire people, and I approve vendors, which is what your recycling company would be if it did contract work for us. I do have a couple of questions. First, I don't want to go to jail, so I need assurance that you aren't doing something that will be traced back to me. Aside from that, I don't understand why you scared the hell out of me and kidnapped me if this is about some contracts or hires. And ones that don't involve that much cost to the company."

"The answer to both questions is the same. We are professionals. Nothing will be traced to you. I brought you here in such a frightening way to show you we mean business. It means you clearly understand that we are professional and deadly and understand what can happen if you cross us."

"Points taken. If that was an example of what you alone can do, I don't want to find out what you and more people can do."

"So you could have hired my plants, but you didn't. The three men we sent in had their applications rejected. They were foreign workers. You rejected my company, too. We

offered a very low-cost contract for cleanup work across various jobs. The thing with my company was a separate deal. I'm always looking to expand business."

"Men from Saudi Arabia. It rings a bell. I remember a new recycling proposal, too. Your company wouldn't happen to be Wizard Waste Management?"

"It is."

"Then it wasn't me that rejected you or the foreign hires. I had already prepared contracts, but as often happens, an investigator who works for the company filed a negative report. He believed the men were impostors even though a security check came up clean. He did not favor contracting with your company because the company we already use has a very clean record. He did not find anything actually wrong with your company."

"I suspected as much. Who is this investigator?"

"Him. He isn't a company employee, and he's been in my hair for a year now. He has embarrassed me so many times that I won't approach senior management before his report on a prospective hire comes in. He always digs up something unsavory. Often, I try to offer jobs to friends or their kids as a favor. But with this guy, I can't do that anymore. He will dig up dirt, discover a conflict of interest, and put it in his report. Believe me, I'd like to get rid of him. So far, I haven't figured out how. He works from the outside. I don't even get to talk to him."

"Give me the name. I assure you we will take care of it."

"Holiday. Joe Holiday. He's a private investigator."

"The reports he put in on my company and the three men, did you show them to senior management?"

"Of course not. When he's not accusing me of a conflict of interest, his reports come to my desk. If negative, I don't pass them on to senior management. I don't want my ears boxed again. That's how it used to happen. In the beginning, all of his reports went directly to the top, but I had that changed."

Johan's eyes went back to the TV. Andras was switching through the channels, not TV channels but security views of various places around his recycling yard. He was big in scrap metal. A huge crawler crane worked next to a mountain of scrap. Another view showed a big green arm with a four-pronged monster claw. The interior of the plant showed green-painted metal stairs, belts, and huge boxes. The workers were nearly all male hard hats. A river of trash flowed on a belt wide as a sidewalk. A minute later, he spoke. "Jalal. Which of your new men should we use to take out Joe Holiday?"

Jalal's answer was immediate. "Muhab. That man has been antsy since he got here. He makes it harder to control the others. If he just happened to have an accident along with Holiday, it might be better for us."

"An experienced Jihadist like Muhab should be able to eat an Internet snoop like Holiday for breakfast. We don't need to hope Muhab will have an accident now. The big job kills him anyway."

“Say, I remember the name. Holiday has been in the news a few times. He has a nose for trouble and a record for brutal behavior. He might offer Muhab a bit of a challenge.”

Johan had guzzled the first beer and was halfway through the second one. The booze was hitting him; maybe it was because of the ordeal or weakness. He decided to interject. “Sending out one of your factory workers to beat Holiday up might not be good. I mean, I’d like to see it, but they might trace it to you.”

Andras frowned, turned his head, and stared at Johan. “I’m not sending out one of my factory workers or beating Holiday up. I’m sending a terrorist out to kill him.”

“Murder,” Johan said in a near whisper. His head spun. “I didn’t know this was about terrorists killing people.”

Andras continued frowning. He turned his head and addressed the woman. “Lena, play some of that back for us.”

Johan looked past Andras, noticing that the woman now had wireless earbuds on and a device of some form in her lap. She pressed a tiny button on it, and Johan heard his voice coming over the loudspeakers on the shelf, saying, “Yes, twenty-five thousand dollars works for me, I need the money...”

Lena clicked it off abruptly, then giggled. Jalal spoke, both his tone and expression grave. “Just in case fear of us wears off, our recording will make sure your fear of senior management and the police remains.”

Johan sighed as he realized he’d moved seamlessly from one trap to another. He took another slug of beer. “Okay, so Joe Holiday dies. But hiring terrorists worries me more than that.”

“Trust us,” Andras said. “Just treat them like new employees ... sensitive ones that might behead you if you say anything to offend Muslims. They believe I am a neo-Nazi, so they’ll think you are affiliated. So long as you do exactly as we say, you have no worries. Just think of it that way. We have a grand plan for the future. A master plan, and maybe someday you’ll be a bigger part of it.”

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Chapter Two: The Drone Hit

Circumstances had Joe Holiday residing in his office rather than his home. This particular fall was an unusual time in his life. Dim memories of it would always linger in the gloomier alleyways of his mind. Like a pale vampire, Joe had abandoned the sunny days and gotten into the habit of staying up all night. There really was nothing special to light up his life, and there wasn’t any hour when he could sleep without interruptions.

The phone would ring constantly as he did freelance work for a wide range of corporations, conducting background checks on foreign nationals working in the country. He gathered the real dope and history of these people’s dirty deeds, so employers could compare it with the false histories they often presented on resumes.

Everyone lied on resumes, and fraud was common, so something would come up on most applicants. Usually, it was small stuff, but sometimes it was creepy.

It was crappy work for a man listed as a private investigator. It put him on equal footing with the rest of that small crowd. Detectives in name, while in reality working like bureaucrats that never leave the office, mostly using the latest special phone and social media lists to track people.

Joe kept getting more of the bureaucratic brand of work. His reputation for uncovering the shady side of people kept his cash flow steady, but he didn't especially enjoy the job. Being the go-to guy for getting something on someone wasn't something to be proud of, and many people didn't want to know the truth. They wanted their selections rubber-stamped, and Joe would be called everything from a racist to a peeper when his investigations muddied people thought to be clean.

Dislike of the work kept him always open to anything else that might come along. With his romantic partner Josie off in Israel for a few months, he'd buried himself in work for a week. Just coffee-stain shadows passing when he smoked in the alley, and more of them on the table as he drank cup after cup of brew and made endless phone calls. Awake all night, red eyes drooping from reading too many emails and texts, darkness and neon outside the window providing unexpected relief after hacking through the dreadfully boring social media lives of job applicants. He didn't bother to go home. He had a condominium, and that worked okay with a couple, but condominium life wasn't his preference. He liked the office better. It was in a shabby old building with an absentee property owner and a few other offices that closed after five.

His office was actually an apartment set up as an office at the front. It felt more like an old-style bachelor pad. Condos never had that feel or the proper odors of age. Joe's alley cat, Tom, lived there and in the back alley, too. He had a pricey TV he rarely watched and was often on without sound, like a bachelor's replacement for a large painting on the wall. The small fridge and microwave were all a Spartan needed, and a big overstuffed couch supported sporadic sleep. There were no real in-house amenities unless the building's spooky basement counted for something. A gym and indoor pool across the street sufficed, and there were three pubs nearby, one of them next to a 24-hour grocery store.

Joe felt guilty. He should've been missing Josie. He'd expected he would. Then he found that he could slip back into a world of nights, lonely bachelorhood, and slide through gray days with such ease it scared him. The emptiness of life could wash over him like a sea, and it didn't bother him. Almost like one day, he would go down into the grave without really noticing. Just another paper-pushing drone finding his end in the trash bin. Perhaps it would be a computer trash bin, as nowadays the files were increasingly electronic, and passing via encryption to customers, as the money to cover his bills passed into his bank account.

Things were just too dull and easy, and the trend could have continued. It didn't because in his case, the easy days never lasted. This time, they became unsettled unexpectedly and quickly. It should have been just another night. He let Tom in through the fire escape at the back, and the big gray cat ate his dinner, which consisted of a can of tuna that cost about double the normal price at the all-night store.

Joe had a big feeder of dry food and a two-gallon water bulb by the entry rug at the back, but Tom would eat trash before he'd eat much kibble. The tuna kept him out of the trash cans. Tom used to bring back pigeons he'd killed, like maybe Joe would cook them for breakfast. One time, he came out of the alley with a watch in his teeth. It was a Breitling watch, new and very expensive. It caused Joe to go out back to see who had been mugged, but he didn't find anyone. He never wore the watch but sold it. The only people in the neighborhood who would recognize a Breitling were the same ones who would cut his hand off to get it. Flashy watches had never been Joe's style, just as jewelry beyond a tie clip never worked for him. He would dress either casually or in a smart suit, but no watches, gold chains, or earrings. He usually knew the time within about five minutes at any time without a watch.

Joe flicked the TV on and started switching restlessly through news channels. The death and decay on the international news held his interest briefly. One channel had a feature on an Islamic war zone, with a fire-breathing terrorist leader verifying that they were in a total world war with the same Western nations that armed them through the back door. As he got up to get a beer, the mayhem leaped and left its overseas reality, arriving in miniature form at his window.

He had heard of drone assassinations abroad; they were yapping about one on TV the other day, but such things didn't happen around home turf. At least it used to be that way. This miniature version of a drone assassination began with a whoosh and snap at the window. He caught the movement with the corner of his eye. Tom moved more quickly than he did and bounded up to the window ledge to swat at the glass. A flash and crack followed Tom's swat, and the window starred but didn't break. Tom jumped down and ran off to hide. The unexpected crack hadn't been caused by his efforts, and it didn't end there; a moment later, Joe heard another rattle and saw more damaged safety glass. Then the screen tore, and another burst came through it.

The hostile object that had been hovering outside the window had gotten trapped in his glove net, and it buzzed angrily, spat out some more sharp sounds, and released one more explosive burst before it died. The projectiles hit the wall clock, cracking its casing. As the noise ended, Joe's foul language filled the gap. He got up, walked over, undid the clips for the screen and the window, opened the window, and pulled the net in.

Most people with offices in a crumbling brick monstrosity do not have experimental drone-hook nets outside their custom safety window and screen, especially not when the window overlooks a sleazy alleyway. The reason he had the equipment came from his early days as a private detective. On the business card, he'd titled his operation Joe Holiday Investigations, but back then, he'd done jobs for numerous security companies, mostly night checks but also installation work. His new incarnation as a paper warrior ended the call work but left him doing the odd installation and with continued access to sexy security gadgets.

The safety glass and screen weren't new, but the capture net was something he was supposedly testing. It could legally capture a peeper drone. The net could shoot out a fair distance on a thin wire and glove a drone. Apparently, the wire shot hadn't triggered well, as it grabbed the small drone right at the window. He remembered telling Sanderson that a laser gun that shot spy drones down would be better, though not

legal. Sanderson had forgotten to bring a drone to test the net. Because of that, it had been installed in his window for three months, and in a makeshift way, as a standard method of fitting it to windows hadn't been decided on yet. A sensor on it detected birds so they wouldn't trigger it.

Sanderson was right about drones. Despite great promise, they were also a public nuisance in areas without any real laws governing them. In this neighborhood, it was hard to figure out who would use a drone. Maybe a drug dealer would use one to spot any lurking undercover people or to make a delivery.

The item he had captured was more like a kill drone, meaning it was illegal and almost certainly not the property of one of the brutal criminals in the neighborhood. As he took it out of the net, he realized his error in going near it. Sometimes his temper overruled his logic. The thing was custom-made with a fatter body than he had expected. It had an advanced battery, camera, and some form of bomb built into it. The bomb had failed to explode properly, and the bursts must have been it fizzling out. Without a doubt, it had been set to go off like a grenade or a nail bomb, but somehow the grab by the capture mesh had messed up its mechanism, causing it to fail.

The thing looked dead now; several large holes were in the blackened, melted plastic body. It had failed, and the battery had received damage, but it hadn't exploded. It was still hot and might blow, so he got out a sturdy metal cash box and snapped it inside. He then forced open another small window in the kitchen area. Using a thin rope tied to the box handle and the cabinet handle, he let it dangle down the side wall. If it exploded now, the metal box would contain most of the explosion, and the brick wall would stop the rest.

A check on the surveillance monitor showed no one at his front or back doors. His office was at the end of the hallway, and the camera gave a full view down it, showing nothing but carpeting with a regal pattern, the bright lights by the elevators, and the security doors to other offices, which were expensive doors that looked cheap because of the wood-grain laminate on them. The two rear cameras showed an empty fire escape and a dimly lit portion of the alley immediately below. No one was on the dusty pavement or in the shadows of the red brick walls. He changed the setting so that anyone near the building's cameras would cause a chirp alert he would receive, then he walked over to the wall clock and examined it.

Small projectiles remained embedded in the plastic. They were more like tiny darts than bullets, though they were all metal. The tip of any kind of bullet would have flattened but these were obviously composed of an incredibly hard substance. Back at the window screen, he found more embedded in the mesh. One was larger. He quickly calculated that someone had planned to get him with a blast, first watching via camera to spot him inside, then sailing the drone in to blow him to pieces with a blast directed through the window. The drone's mission was to go off like a nail bomb and shred him.

Unfortunately for the drone's pilot, his prized toy was unexpectedly netted, causing the system to fail. They would not have known he had safety glass in the window, which would have muffled even a full blast. And they would be nearby. Close enough to be able to see the explosion. Joe calculated that the surprise of the failure would most likely cause a lone man to run off quickly. A determined man might wait and expect him

to rush out the door and become an easy target. Two or more men would probably come up after him. Originally, they may have planned to come in for a quick look after the explosion to see if he was finished.

The image of one man or possibly a woman solidified in his mind. Two or more hostiles wouldn't need a drone bomb when old-fashioned thuggery would be easier. He'd been pushing paper so long his mind drew a blank when he tried to imagine an enemy. Desk clerks don't attract killers. Someone from his colorful past perhaps out for revenge. He thought it over, but this seemed new and unexplained. There were a couple of old enemies he could imagine tossing a bomb through his window, but nothing experimental like this one. They wouldn't do it that way even if it were possible. Killers usually went with brutal methods because they delivered dead bodies with the most efficiency. Using a drone not only called for a fancy skill set but also access to the needed parts in a world where everything could be traced.

He decided to call Sanderson on an encrypted call. He answered on the third ring. "Holiday. For fuck sakes. I told you to stop calling me at 1 am."

"I finally tested your drone glove."

"Forget about that. We conducted a market study but couldn't produce a sales graph for it. It was just an idea, one that failed. We are always experimenting with new stuff."

"Ah, so it won't sell. It did work. Someone else is experimenting. They just tried to hit me with an armed drone by sending it to my office window. Would you have any idea who would be able to make a custom drone fitted with a nail bomb?"

"This is a joke, right? If anyone manufactured one, it wasn't us. Only a military manufacturer can make a genuine armed drone. Anyone who touches that area can be swept up under anti-terror laws. Your office area in the slums would likely feature only cheap peeper drones. The gist is that the government wants to convince the public that drones are safe. Hence, the severe laws on armed drones. Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"I'm not talking about a military kill machine like those drone planes they run to take out terrorists in foreign nations. As I said, this is a Mickey Mouse thing and fat at the central body that held the bomb. It contained small sharp projectiles, not nails really, but smaller and extremely sharp and hard."

"Don't bring it anywhere near me. I never heard about it either. Call the police. If they verify that it's real, then you'll probably have spy agencies checking it out. Maybe some nut came up with a clever design using a 3D plastic printer. It would be someone who knows how a bomb works and how to design a drone body. Crap, only some kind of terrorist would know how to do that."

"I'm not going to report it if it will draw intelligence agency heat on to me. They'll try to implicate me in it. The terrorist theory doesn't make sense. Your average terrorist wouldn't be testing his new kill drone by targeting me."

"You're a detective, so do some legwork. Trace the people who sent it and bust them up. If someone is targeting you, then you have to get to them first. The police won't be of any help. By the time they get any results, your funeral will be long over."

“Calling the police would not work, that is for sure. They’d make it impossible for me to move without being watched. You can do me one favor. I’m living in the office apartment. You put in the security system at my condominium. Just add to the contract. I want you to sweep it daily until further notice. A full sweep for everything.”

“I can do that, but what about Josie? I don’t think she’ll be happy about my gorillas dropping by every day.”

“Josie won’t be inconvenienced. She doesn’t have to worry about drones or anything with less force than a nuclear attack. She’s in Israel, another contract for that new biotech firm, in one of the safest complexes on earth.”

Joe hung up, and then he sat in his armchair for fifteen minutes with Tom on his lap. He thought it over, then went to his laptop and ran a custom AI search program with queries about small drones. He then put the laptop on a shelf in the closet. He took a Sig with night sights and a shoulder holster from a hidden drawer, then closed and locked the steel rollover door.

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Joe pulled off his blue denim pants and put on black pants, dark socks, boots, and a plain black pullover sweater. He put on his holster, then pulled a dark wool-and-nylon field coat from the rack. He favored that coat at night because it had big pockets, was water-resistant, and didn’t cause him to sweat if a burst of activity was required. It also gave him an anonymous look while being stylish enough that he didn’t look like a street person. Most of the items he might need were already in his pockets, including a burner phone and a tiny military-grade flashlight.

Tom had already gathered that he was going out and waited by the back door. Joe did not intend to let him out right away, so he opened the fridge, peeled off a slice of lunchmeat, and folded it on the table. The cat jumped up and fed, leaving Joe time to exit. Tom had a hidden cat door out, but closing him in usually kept him inside for at least a short while. Joe didn’t turn on the light in the small vestibule, and he opened the back door quietly. The cameras had already told him he could step out, but he still had to go down three levels on the fire escape, and someone hiding up the alley would have time to spot him and run up and shoot.

Stepping out, he paused to check both ways down the alley, and when he saw nothing dangerous, he went down the steps quickly and quietly. The alley was clear both ways for a piece from behind his office. Two loading docks were inset, but farther north, there were dumpsters and rubbish heaps. A mosaic of clown images formed the graffiti on the far wall. The images fanned like a deck of cards from a happy clown to a dark and evil clown. Joe had studied the image many times. It wasn’t signed, but it was definitely art, existing among spray-paint scrawl that scarred most of the alley walls. It marked a sudden shift from meaningless squiggles and base words like Muthufucka to the emergence of genuine artists who create images.

Some of the graffiti had been done in glow paint. It was mostly on the side with the clowns, giving the alley a surreal appearance as he began to move slowly down it. Joe kept near the wall. Initially, no signs of movement showed. The south end widened near

its mouth, and he kept left, moving through weed stubble and flattened fast-food trash. The last few feet were like a giant ashtray with the cigarette litter of workers from a warehouse. All of its windows were darkened, as were nearly all of the windows up the alley.

He studied the street. The alley came out near the corner. No one was at the all-night bus stop. A lonely drunk shambled along muttering to himself. A speeding yellow taxi appeared and vanished around the corner. A public housing monstrosity was in the direction the drunk had taken. Joe could see many lights on in its upper floors. No one would approach the place at this time unless they lived there or were buying drugs. The corner was the boundary line. Generally, the public-housing night gangsters wouldn't come up this far on foot because it meant entering an area with actual police patrols. Police didn't patrol the public complex, but would arrive in large numbers there if called.

It was lights out the other way. Ricky Sample's Gym, across from his building, was dark and would remain so until five am, when it opened to customers with an ID number. Often, Joe was the lone person inside working out at five am. Beyond it, streetlights created pools of illumination in a long, desolate run up to the flashing neon at the Big Kat 24-hr variety. There was always activity there and cars pulling in and out. Tonight was no different from any other night.

Joe decided to check the other end of the alley and turned. A shadow caught his eye, moving near a broad window up on the second floor of a warehouse. He instinctively moved into the cover of the shadows, then relaxed when the image solidified in his mind. It was gone now, but it had been a security guard behind the smoky glass. The cap, shoulder badge, and loose tie meant the dim figure could be nothing else. The warehouse was a Beech Brothers property that didn't need much security because it stored cheap wholesale appliances. Thieves nearly always went for high-end goods, not refurbished fridges, stoves, or other appliances.

Joe wrote it off and headed up the alley toward the north. The north section was sloppy, with dumpsters and trash heaps. Trash and delivery truck drivers hated it because they couldn't always get through and often had to back all the way down from the other end. The trash heaps spilled from an ancient yet huge apartment complex with an open back lot on the west side. People from around the neighborhood and elsewhere had decided that this was the go-to spot to dump their pickup loads of junk. Joe doubted that the drone operator would work from this section because it stank like piss, dog shit, and the trash pickers and drunks that frequented it.

Some light filtered down from above, and there were city lights in part of the alley, but they were blacked out in this section. That left a moon glow and enough darkness that Joe let his eyes adjust before plunging into the area. He moved quietly, but the gravel was noisy. Fallen leaves also crunched as he walked. Someone else was present, as he heard a can crush underfoot, then a wheeze. The person was behind a dumpster and a stack of crates, so he drew his gun and stepped around, nearly firing at a man stumbling right towards him. He realized it was a drunk, and a smelly one that muttered a curse as Joe moved aside. The man may have been drunk but not blind because he threw out an arm but didn't touch Joe as he passed. Joe wasn't afraid of him, but he

was afraid of the tuberculosis the man might be carrying, as he'd read that some transients in the neighborhood had it.

The man halted, coughed, and then stumbled out into the alley. As he turned away and stepped out of view, Joe heard four loud pops. The sound was like a handgun and not like a handgun. The pops were not fully suppressed, but they were too quiet to be anything issued from your usual cheap local handgun. It was a gun sound, but he had no idea what brand of gun.

He heard the drunk bellow and could tell he was stumbling over to the far wall. Swinging out fast, Joe prepared to fire. But it was so dark it was hard to see. The drunk was against the wall, sliding to the ground, and moaning. Something flew through the air, so Joe ducked back and then went out again. He saw a man running south in the alleyway. The man ran fast, a real sprinter, and Joe saw enough to see that he was wearing a security guard's outfit. The man glanced back as he ran, barely breaking his stride.

Conflicting thoughts immediately filled Joe's mind. He could fire a series of shots and probably get him. At the same time, he remembered that the usual guard at the warehouse on weeknights was Sonny, a Sri Lankan guy as broad as a shed. The man fleeing was athletic, copper-skinned, about six feet, and obviously strong. Joe wanted to shoot; he was almost certain this was the drone man, but he couldn't because there was a slight chance he was mistaken. There was always the possibility that it was some dumb security guard who had decided to do a patrol, got spooked by a charging drunk, and shot him. Shooting him in the back might be hard to explain to the police, so Joe found himself running. And unfortunately, he had hesitated a couple of seconds too long.

He kept pace, even gained some yards, but the runner was now far ahead and turning left at the alley mouth. Joe slowed to holster his gun, tripped doing it, and stumbled ahead. Bursting out of the alley mouth into an ambush wasn't in his plans. He stopped, worked his way carefully along, and stepped out, ready to step back into the cover of the wall quickly if necessary. He didn't find an ambush waiting. The man was already up the street towards the public housing area. Joe watched as he jumped into the bed of an old battered pickup truck parked there, and as soon as he was inside, the truck eased out. Joe couldn't see the driver; there was no plate on the back, it was covered ... and the man looking back at him wore a crisp security guard's outfit. His cap shadowed his face until he turned it, and the streetlight caught him. His skin tone was copper in the night light, and his beard was just a notch above whisker stubble. The eyes were big and expressive, taking on a sinister aspect at night. It convinced Joe that the man was Arab rather than Italian or Greek. It was only a short glance because the man didn't remain standing but got down to hide himself as the truck picked up speed and disappeared out of sight.

A minute later, Joe was back up the alley checking on the drunk. The man rested on his side, blood had spilled through his lips, and his eyes were open and staring at infinity. He wore a scuffed cloth coat that had a bottle of sherry inside because Joe could smell it. Sherry and blood, it was an odd combination to overpower the usual fragrance of piss. The man was rough-shaven. Joe knew no one would target this man for death because he'd declared himself dead when he decided he couldn't let go of the bottle.

Despite the man's fallen state, Joe felt he should show him some respect, maybe pay for his funeral, because by accident he had saved his life.

He found the gun nearby, in the darkness by the wall. His military flashlight illuminated it, revealing why it had sounded strange and why the man had thrown it. It was a plastic fabrication ... a 3D-printed gun. It had fired four rounds that were hot enough to warp the barrel's end. Playing the beam over it, he studied the design's neatness. Done in shades of gray to black, it was realistic with all the features – grip panel, backstrap, trigger and guard, magazine release, sights, slide, and handle screws. He knew it didn't work exactly like a genuine handgun, and it was surprising that someone would work to make it look so real. You wouldn't win a shootout with it, but if all you wanted to do was shoot Joe Holiday in the back, it was a capable instrument.

These were weird killers, using a drone and a plastic gun when nothing was stopping them from using a quality weapon. He figured that the man driving the truck, the one that he didn't see, was probably the drone operator. The second man with the plastic gun had been watching for him to come out the back. He hadn't recognized the man, so it meant contract killers. But who would hire contract killers that operated the way they did? No professional would arrive at a hit in a beat-up pickup truck. It was too conspicuous, and he was sure that type of vehicle didn't drive well without a load.

He decided not to touch the gun and to get rid of his own weapon. It would be better to say he was unarmed. He jogged back up the alley. As he opened the back door, Tom burst out. He left him in the vestibule, then went inside and stashed the gun and shoulder holster. He didn't see anyone in the alley when he went back out, so he went down with Tom at his heels and checked the warehouse. A trellis covered with dead vines hid a recessed entry from the alleyway. Joe had seen the security guard come out of that exit to smoke on some nights. He checked it and found the door forced. There was no exterior handle, just a lock facing on a tight metal security door. The burglar had used a pry bar, and he had alerted the guard. Joe knew that because he found the night guard lying beside a pile of packing boards just inside. It was Sonny, the regular night guard – a big Sri Lankan. He looked more like a Big Daddy than a Sonny, but maybe his father was even bigger. Size hadn't helped him this time. A treacherous criminal, wearing a uniform stolen from the same security company, had ambushed him. Joe played his flashlight over Sonny, then squatted and checked his pulse. He was alive and breathing faintly. He'd been struck on the side of his head, and blood showed in his matted hair. A few slaps failed to rouse him, so it looked like a coma. He pulled out his phone to call an ambulance, and as he did, he heard a siren. One was already on the way up the street.

The ambulance, siren wailing, went around to the top of the alley. As soon as Joe stepped out, he saw the police already gathered around the body. They had arrived swiftly, without sirens, and were already set up like they'd been there a while, though he knew it could only have been a couple of minutes. He walked toward the scene, feeling a bit sick and dizzy. A long night trying to explain things to cops wasn't something that thrilled him. Tom appeared and followed him up to the area, which was brightly lit by the post-mounted light at the window of the marked car. The other car was undercover, no hubcaps, heavy window tint, and a light bar at the top of the front windshield. The cruiser cops realized the man was dead as one of them was talking to the ambulance

crew. The lone occupant of the undercover car appeared to have control of the scene because he wasn't allowing the other uniformed man to do anything other than move his car spotlight here and there to highlight the scene.

Joe spoke as soon as he stepped up. "There's an injured security guard in the warehouse down at the other end. This man is dead, so there's no use wasting time on him."

The undercover man, mulatto in appearance and around the same build and height as Joe, immediately turned on him, pulling his Glock from his shoulder holster. "Put your hands up and turn. Place them against the wall."

Joe raised an eyebrow, but did as he said. "Spread your legs farther apart. Try to run, and we'll shoot."

Joe said nothing. He continued to do as he was told and went through the pat-down.

"Okay, you can turn around," the undercover man said. "He flashed his badge long enough for Joe to read the name, Detective Sterling Brodie.

"You were involved in this shootout?" Brodie asked.

"There was no shootout. As I just said, there's a badly injured security guard down at the warehouse. The side door from the alley has been forced. The guard isn't shot, but it looks like a coma induced by a blow to the head. He needs help fast."

Brodie kept his gun out. The uniformed cop swung the spotlight into Joe's face. "You're under arrest," Brodie said. He waved his gun at the uniformed man. "Officer Keller, get that fucking spotlight off of him. Take your car and the ambulance around the block to the other end. I'll walk down with this guy." He glanced at the dead man on the ground. "Screw this bum for now. Have your partner stay here and guard the crime scene."

Keller didn't waste any time. He barked orders at his partner and the two ambulance attendants, even though they had heard what Brodie said. The cars were already moving as Brodie walked Joe down the alley, and Brodie didn't hurry; he kept looking around as if he expected someone to jump out of the shadows.

"You can put the gun away," Joe said. "The shooters are gone."

"Really. Maybe you're one of them. Maybe that's your gun on the ground back there. I see a crime scene and no one around but you."

"I don't use a plastic gun, unless it's a water pistol."

"Plastic, who said it is plastic?"

"A close look will show what it is. It's a 3-D printed gun. I'm not an expert on the subject, but I know what I see."

"Ah, so your prints are on it. Trying to make it like a witness that came on the scene and checked it out."

"My prints aren't on it. There will be no prints on it. The shooter was a hit man. He planned to shoot me in the back, but he made a mistake and shot a wino."

Brodie released a guttural laugh. "He shot a bum by mistake. Big mistake for a hit man. So what makes you so important that a hit man is on you?"

"Beats me. I honestly have no idea."

"Well, in my experience, people usually know when someone is gunning for them. Quite often, they don't want to talk about it. Say, is that big cat yours?"

"He is, and he's leading us right to the fallen guard."

"So you live around here?"

"If you had checked my ID like you were supposed to, you'd know who I am and where I live."

"Didn't have to check. My pal in the cruiser told me who you were before you even got up that alley. You're Joe Holiday. That means this whole deal ties into one of those weird cases of yours. Now, if you're observant, you'll notice I didn't call you a private investigator, and that's because in my opinion, you fit the description of a con man more than anything."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. This is it here, behind that trellis. The door was forced, the guard sapped. He's in bad shape. He's a Sri Lankan guy, immigrant, named Sonny."

"Now here we go again. You just happened to be on the scene of this crime, too. And I bet we'll find that you and Sonny weren't getting along."

Joe didn't answer Brodie. The ambulance and the cruiser had pulled to the warehouse front instead of the alley, so Joe yelled, "Around here!" The two attendants appeared swiftly with a roll bed and a lift stretcher fastened to its side. Brodie waved Joe ahead, so he ducked past the trellis and pulled out his flashlight on the way inside.

"Any lights in here?" Brodie said, and when Joe's answer was no, he grabbed Joe's flashlight.

The ambulance attendants rumbled in with the bed but were held in the dusty dark while Brodie walked around, using the flashlight to illuminate Sonny and the area around him. He took three quick photos with his cellphone, then he bent down, listened to Sonny's breathing, and whistled as he stood up.

Joe cleared his throat. "I need him alive, so I hope that whistle is a call for our ambulance people to get him to the emergency ward."

Brodie flicked the beam onto Joe, "Always thinking about number one, eh Joe?"

Joe felt like slugging him, but the ambulance attendants took over. The lead attendant was a woman. She had a build similar to the stump of a redwood, a man's haircut, and a face that could scare off a mountain lion. She also had no patience for Brodie, and it showed when she flicked on a light clipped to her breast and physically knocked Brodie aside as she moved in with the stretcher. Joe simply turned and walked back out to the alley, and that caused Brodie to rush out on his tail.

Officer Keller was outside and poking around in the alley. He wasn't concerned about Joe at all. Having more common sense than Brodie, he realized that since Joe had been identified, there was nothing he could do but comply.

Joe glanced at Brodie and judged his behavior as a sign of insecurity, and he figured that a cop like Brodie probably closed cases by managing to incriminate the first person on the scene. Though the urge to slug Brodie remained strong, Joe fought it by bringing to mind his lawyer. He had an excellent lawyer, and within a few hours, Brodie would discover that he wasn't railroading one of the boys from the public housing complex. Things weren't going to be easy for him at all.

"I have a photographic memory," Brodie said to no one in particular. "I won't forget what I saw in there."

"Good, then you won't forget these either," said Officer Keller, holding up a plastic baggy with a pair of rubber gloves inside it. "Found them right here by the wall, and they look fresh. They belong to the shooter, no doubt."

Brodie took a step, was about to say something, but the ambulance attendants emerged in a rush, and he was again knocked aside. Sonny was strapped on, muttering something, and, seeing it, Joe became excited and started following the rolling bed. "Great, great, he's recovering," Joe said.

The attendants didn't reply. The huge woman tried to swat him away with a short arm. She glared at him, and the message in her eyes said guilty, not just of sapping Sonny, but also of being a man of the sort she didn't favor.

Halting, Joe watched as they hurried away. Brodie had been caught off guard again; he'd stumbled against the trellis and was brushing dead leaves off his jacket. "Jeeze, Holiday. Do I have to handcuff you?" he said. "When is it going to dawn on you that you're a suspect?"

"He's not a suspect," a hoarse voice said, and when Brodie turned, he saw an old man standing by Keller. The man wore slippers and a long coat. He looked respectable, with white hair, with a yellowed look, probably from tobacco smoke.

"How do you fit in with this?" Brodie said, with obvious irritation in his tone.

"I'm Leeland Green. I called in the crime. I reported the flying saucer at Mr. Holiday's window."

Brodie looked up at the sky, and then he shook his head in frustration. He looked to Keller and to Joe. "Okay. We have established that Mr. Green knows who Joe Holiday is."

"Oh, I know who he is," Green said. "He's been in the news before with those odd cases of his. This time, he really messed up and got aliens after him. They shot out his window. I saw it; my apartment is almost directly across from his."

Brodie turned to Joe. "So ... I think we can rule out the flying saucer and just say there was gunfire at your window. That means you have been withholding evidence."

"Well ...er. I was going to get to that once this initial investigation is complete. The witness is correct. A UFO did appear at my window."

"I saw a bright flash," Green said, and as he continued, Officer Keller guffawed. It wasn't intentional. Embarrassed, he turned away and looked back up the alley toward his cruiser and his partner. Brodie covered his eyes and forehead with his hands, as if getting a migraine.

"Look," Joe said. "I'll make a statement. He'll make a statement. You'll understand exactly what happened. The uniforms can take him to the station for an interview. I'll take you up, show you my window, and give you the evidence I have captured."

Brodie's eyes flashed to Keller. "Okay, take the witness and get his statement. I'll take Holiday back to his place. We'll sort out the little green men and see what we have."

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Two and a half hours later, Joe was sitting in a small rectangular room at the local police station. He'd gone over his story with Brodie and had given him the description of one of the men and the pickup truck. But that didn't matter much because Brodie treated that description as another UFO report. He kept pressing for other information Joe didn't have. Though Joe didn't particularly like Brodie, he understood his methods. Joe had been a cop, a detective, and a fast-rising one in younger years before controversial cases involving shootings ended his police career. As a cop, he would have thought much like Brodie. When a shooter was gunning for someone, the person usually knew it and often refused to give police a name. A story about men in a beat-up pickup simply sounded fabricated. The description of the man he'd seen as an Islamic type sounded straight out of a comic book. The neighborhood had few people of that description. Joe's having a drone capture net and tough safety glass in his window wasn't the norm either. Brodie kept giving Joe a blank stare when he talked about that stuff, like he was waiting for his analytical skills to click in, but nothing was happening.

The interrogation room wasn't exactly a luxury suite. The room was adjacent to temporary holding cells and had cinderblock walls painted with about five coats of buff paint. The brilliant overhead fluorescent lights created discomfort. A Plexiglas window gave him a view of some handcuffed suspects sitting on a bench by the cell entrance. Most of them were black gang types from the public housing area that took up much of the neighborhood, and those people were the third or fourth generation growing up there. Perhaps the view from the interrogation room was to loosen the tongues of people wanting to stay out of those cells. Joe saw them glancing his way with mean looks. Brodie would never interview any of them because they would never talk to cops unless it was to unload some false information.

Joe hadn't been handcuffed, and there were reasons for it. He was granted an interview without phoning a lawyer. A witness had called in the crime. They hadn't been able to get anything but rambling from Sonny. Lacking evidence, Brodie hoped that playing nice would prompt Joe to talk and incriminate himself.

Joe had nothing incriminating to spill, and he was now sitting facing Brodie under the bright lights. They both had strong-brew coffee in Styrofoam cups and lit cigarettes.

Joe broke the ice. "I thought these shitty cups were banned."

Brodie blew out a series of blue-tinted smoke rings. "I know smoking is banned. Cups probably are too, but you used to be a cop, so you know the budget. Most likely, the

department bought the last batch of 500,000 cups at a discount and stored them in the warehouse. Everything they come up with for supplies is old junk. My new desk looks like it came from a battleship that was decommissioned fifty years ago.”

“It's easy to figure. They don't spend much on this neighborhood or the station here. I think the city sees it as a bad investment.”

“They must see you as a bad investment, too. They put me on it because the shots were near public housing, and they figured it might be a way to put some gang bangers away. Then it turns out the guy killed wasn't exactly the mayor. I was supposed to release you and work on the case in my spare time. Then something weird happened.”

“What weird happened? You told me I could go after this interview.”

“Well, I haven't filed anything on this case yet. But that one uniformed cop, Keller, did. The guy is brown-nosing for a promotion. He had a preliminary typed up and filed thirty minutes after it happened. He can type seventy-five words a minute, and shoot himself in the foot while doing it. Fifteen minutes after the report went on the system, we got a call from the feds. Ever heard of the CSE?”

“Yes. But they are supposed to be monitoring the Internet for terrorist stuff, aren't they?”

“They monitor us, too. It's called information sharing. Officer Keller dressed up his report with words like Kill Drone, Suspected Terrorist, and Exotic Gun. I'm willing to bet they have a file on you because Keller said they seemed to know all about you.”

“They would know something about me. My main income lately has been from working for top corporations. I research foreign nationals who are mostly seeking jobs at companies or branches here. National security agencies know I put in queries on people to see if anything comes up.”

“I see. I mean, I see that many people didn't get their dream job because of you. Fuck ... there could be fifty different people who want you dead. The spooks have probably been following your illegal research tactics all along, and bagging any gems you happen to dig up. But that now has nothing to do with me. That part of the case is now theirs. They have the drone's remains, too. The bomb squad removed it from outside your window with a special claw. They say you can return home. I have a dead body and a description of at least one suspect, so I still have the power to look for a murder suspect and arrest him.”

“Okay. So if the murder is part of your case. What exactly will they be doing?”

“Hell if I know. They told me to toss you in a holding cell until they send someone in. But I have no law to hold you under, so you can consider yourself free to go, and free to dodge any bullets out there on the street.”

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It wasn't Friday night, it was the Wednesday overnight, and that meant dead quiet out on the neighborhood streets. The wind was up from the south with faint odors of the lakefront. The police station was an imposing building with a row of arches at the front, and Joe stood under one arch. A lone black car passed on the street, sending some dry

leaves sailing on the sidewalk. The streetlights in this part of town were sodium and not LED lights. They created a yellowish monochrome effect, giving the street an old-movie feel. No cabs were lining up at the police station as cops all drove, and the customers leaving usually weren't of the paying kind.

Joe had forgotten to bring a phone, so it meant hoofing it a couple of blocks to a place where the police weren't scaring the neighborhood quiet. Crossing the road, he walked a block past an area of Oriental shops and Vietnamese restaurants. Darkened windows and signs had changed these blocks from garish to lonely. A sharp right turn up a side street took him into a residential neighborhood. Raccoons scooted across the road up in front of him. The animals didn't concern him, but something he'd spotted while crossing the road did.

Someone was following him on foot, carefully, staying well back. Joe had spotted him while standing out front of the police station, half a block away, loitering in a bus shelter, though there was no all-night bus running on this street. Since muggers never stake out territory near police stations, the man was following him specifically. From the brief look, he'd seen a dark navy hip-length fall coat, just a bit of the man's face in profile, and running shoes with white as part of the coloring. No one smart would wear bright running shoes when following someone at night. An oversight, perhaps, and one the man probably made up for by being doubly dangerous.

As the profile settled in Joe's mind, he became convinced it was the same man he'd seen escaping in the back of the pickup. A hit man, and that meant the track shoes were for running. The weapon would be a gun or a knife, and he would want to follow Joe a piece from the police station to do the job ... mainly because police cruisers have that habit of suddenly appearing near police stations. He would have to get up close because it was hard to shoot someone half a block away with a handgun. Joe also realized that meant the man would try to close the gap slowly without being seen and then use those track shoes to sprint in for the kill.

Joe wasn't armed. If he ran back to the police station now, the man would get a clear shot at him. The only sensible tactic was to run away before the gap began to close. He took off suddenly like a sprinter, but he wanted to be sure, so he glanced back as he did. Some luck aided him. The look back showed him the taillights of a cruiser disappearing as it headed for the station. It was out of reach as far as help went, but the tail was just turning onto the side street, and he couldn't break out into a run until he was fully out of sight of the cop car.

Joe didn't have to look back to see that because after a few seconds, he heard the slap of the man's big feet on the sidewalk. The quiet night carried the irritating sound. Those damn shoes; the man would be really pissed about that poor choice because after a few seconds, Joe could measure the distance between them just by the sound. The pursuer was closing; Joe made an abrupt turn into an alleyway. A cat hissed, and he thought better of it and ran across and up and into a tiny city parkette ... one of those tiny green spaces sandwiched between buildings and containing some flowers, bushes, and a mini playground for kids ... as well as a dead end. He'd been hoping it would go through to an alley or the next street, and he couldn't turn back.

There was a fence, then a vine-covered wall that ran up two stories. Joe went over the fence, up the wall, using fists full of vines. He heard a pop as he rolled out on a flat roof and knew the weapon was a gun with a suppressor attached. Stopping to shoot had slowed the man. "You missed me," Joe taunted as he got up and turned to run. He heard the man curse, then he heard him struggling with the fence and grinned. The taunt had thrown the man off balance.

Joe didn't look back; there wasn't a moment to waste. He was running for his life across a flat stony roof, and he realized it was a long parking garage. One of those huge underground deals with a couple of levels, also at ground level. The entry lights were bright, and he was approaching them, running as fast as he could because once the guy got on the roof behind him, Joe's silhouette running into bright light would provide a clearer target. He'd have a good chance of hitting him with a handgun, but he could also very likely miss. And miss he did, because Joe felt the burning heat of a shot passing right by his ear as he reached the end of the roof. He was running too fast to stop; he had no choice but to jump and hope for the best.

The best turned out to be a noisy, reckless feet-first landing on the roof of a parked SUV, followed by a tumble from it to the ground. Out of sheer luck, he rolled up on about the only grassy island in a lake of concrete and got off running again. He'd gained some and looked back as he reached the street. He saw his pursuer trying to aim from the roof's edge, but the distance was too great, so he pocketed the gun and jumped down to the parking lot. Joe realized that he'd gone up a notch in the killer's estimation. No plastic gun this time and no playing around. The man wanted the job done and a dead body on the streets.

The race was on again, and Joe's lungs were burning. He was really beginning to hate this man, and he got a better look at him. He didn't look local, and that wasn't because of his dark Middle Eastern features and hair. In a multi-racial city, numerous descriptions could be considered a local look. It was the choice of very cheap running shoes with confused casual clothes that made the man look foreign. He'd seen that overseas, not in this neighborhood where a punk out to shoot him would have better shoes than the rest of his clothing. And his clothes were ill-fitting. Coat and shirt too big, pant legs too short like he'd thrown on clothes someone else had given him. This guy hadn't been spending long hours as a detective desk clerk like Joe, either. As a professional killer, he kept a schedule that kept him in shape. The man was about one step short of being a professional runner.

Joe's shoes were superior. The race became even more pronounced, and Joe realized one big mistake he'd made was running down a side street that was light industry. An industrial dead zone at this time of night, and he was running right down the center of the road, as there wasn't a car on it. His pursuer had lost ground but was gaining again. Shaking him didn't seem possible. A few night-lights were on, there might be the odd security guard around, but most of them weren't armed. Drawing in help would probably just get someone else shot.

He focused as he ran; he knew this series of blocks, though he hadn't walked them in a long time. An idea came to him. He knew of a booze can a block right on Delaware Street behind The Atomic, a local bar. The bar would be closed; he'd been in the back

on a previous investigation. It was an all-night crocodile hole for a mix of white, black, Vietnamese, and whatever other flavors of dealers and gangsters were around after every other place had closed.

The best shortcut was through a condominium complex of two towers and a courtyard. Joe vaulted the iron gate and ran down a walk with gardens on either side. He passed one tower and turned to run across the courtyard. His pursuer nearly missed him. As Joe slowed to glance back, he saw the guy on the other side of the gate looking the other way. Then his head turned, and he saw Joe. Spitting out the word, fuck, Joe kept running and he had to turn again to run out the driveway entry to the courtyard. A quick dodge was required to avoid a car coming in. He heard a security guard shout from a distant entry, saw his pursuer crossing the courtyard, and then he reached the corner of Delaware and ran down it.

A taxi honked its horn as he crossed the road in front of it. Just up a ways, the bar's side outdoor patio, which was closed, sat in darkness. Long wooden slab tables were next to a painted brick wall with the Atomic logo in large letters. He ran past the entry to the bar, went over the railing, and ran down the side patio. At the end of this patio, a tall white wall extended to the next building. A rear patio, shrouded by trees, was on the other side of the wall, and there was an interior basement area down some steps. He knew people would be out back even in the fall, and that was certain because he could smell smoke and see a faint haze of tinted light.

Joe was exhausted. He felt near collapse, and the wall was high. His hand slipped on the top, and he failed to pull himself up. He saw his pursuer a ways off in the center of the street. The guy had thought Joe ducked down an alley just before the patio, but he again spotted him. This time, he took out his gun as he ran and didn't look the least bit winded. It inspired Joe to take three steps back and try the jump again. He got to the top of the wall, rolled, and fell to the patio below. He immediately came up on his knees and found himself facing more bad news.

It was Vietnamese night at the booze can, an unexpected situation. There were about ten lean male gangsters and some women outside. They were obviously taking advantage of the warm fall night in a quiet way. There was no music or din. Some of them were standing, others sat askew at tables, and there were three of the local bosses sitting at the most distant, heavily guarded table.

Joe's first attempt at jumping the wall had attracted attention, so that by the time he came over, every eye in the place was on him. On his knees, three handguns pointed at him, Joe put his hands up. He was so winded he could barely speak. His words came out like a hoarse whisper. "He's coming over the wall. He's going to shoot"

On cue, his pursuer did just that. Not a weak pass over the wall like Joe's, but more like Batman was arriving on the scene with a flutter of his dark fall coat. He landed in the darkest section, lightly on his feet, next to a planter, with his cheap running shoes being the most visible part of him. His dark clothes and features added to the sinister magic. He instinctively pulled his gun, and the suppressor attached was all the identification needed.

Local gangsters didn't use suppressors; only hit men did. Unfortunately, this guy only realized the situation he'd landed in when it was too late. He had expected that Joe was vaulting a wall to cut across some empty space to another escape route, but the realization was that he would never land lightly on his feet again because at least four guns were on him, and they all fired shots.

The Batman did a half spin; his arms flailed, and he fired a couple of wild shots into the air. His body shook as he collapsed. Seconds later, he was a dead body in a dark corner. The guns turned on Joe, but no one fired because his hands were up and he wasn't armed. One of the bosses, a man named Tan, rose from a table in the distance and slowly walked over. He raised a hand in a "don't shoot" gesture. He took a drag off his cigarette. "I know this guy, it's Joe Holiday. So tell us, Joe. Who is that guy, and why are you here with him?"

"I'm not with him. I saw him hanging around on the other side of the road. He looked agitated. I didn't even know who was in here tonight. I was going to circle to the side entrance off the parking lot and warn whoever was here. He wandered off a ways, then he turned on me and drew his gun. I jumped the wall."

It was a bold lie, and Joe doubted it would work. The sweat gleaming on his face wasn't only from the run. Tan was probably too smart to believe such a dumb story, and two of his boys were dragging the body out into the light. They literally looked like boys, being no more than eighteen or nineteen.

"Hey Tan," one of them said. "Remember I told you about those Algerians or Syrians or whatever they are? Three foreigners. Been loitering around town for a while. They were hanging around the Liberty Import Complex late at night, scouting things, spying. This dead jerk is one of them."

Tan's face lit with interest. He walked over and studied the body. The bullet wounds were torso hits. He saw the face clearly. He flicked his ash on the corpse. "I don't know what those guys are here for, but we'll bury the others if we see them again. This one is dressed like a bum and armed like a hit man. Someone must have sent him, but I can't figure out who. Clean this up before the cops come snooping around."

He turned to Joe, his gaze focused and serious. "Tell the truth. Who is that guy?"

Joe was on his feet, but he made sure he made no sudden moves with his hands. "He's nobody now. I didn't know there was more than one of them around. The cops are looking for a man who fits his description. He shot a neighborhood drunk, and he broke into a warehouse and put a security guard into a coma. He was on the other side of the wall, as I said. But why, I don't know."

The body had already been bundled and removed. It had been done so fast the man might never have existed. Booze can staff were wiping up the blood. "You're a problem, Holiday. We don't want cops."

"Cops, no way would I say anything to them. They'd think I brought him here and shot him. That new undercover man, Sterling Brodie, is gunning for me. He'd probably try to say that the hit man was an innocent victim."

Tan was lighting a new cigarette from the stub of his old one. He chuckled when he heard Brodie's name. "Get out of here, Holiday. The other way, through the parking lot. I don't care who that guy was because all he is now is dead. The rest of his gang will be too, if they don't stay out of this neighborhood."

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Joe would have preferred to identify the strange man. A trace on him would give him focus. Dealing with evil that seemed to be coming from a blind alley was difficult. He'd seen enough to be sure the man wasn't local unless he was a recent immigrant. The level of endurance and his tactics indicated some form of military training. The attempt at killing with a drone may have been simple arrogance. They were so certain he would be a soft, easy kill that they decided to do a trial run with a new weapon. These guys did not spec out as ordinary criminals.

Arrogance they had, but not luck. He considered that as he walked down a narrow passage with a high rubble-stone wall on one side and a bleached board fence on the other. Dim lights and shadows greeted him as he emerged in the gravel parking lot. Two of Tan's slim men were there beside a BMW Z4, and a third man was on the south side of the lot by the curb talking to two cops in a cruiser. Joe went the other way to avoid being seen, knowing the investigation into any gunfire was already ending.

If Tan's gang could drive cars with the price tag of the Z4, they could easily pay off local cops. Hell, the cops would see it as a bonus and hope the Vietnamese boys had shot one of their own and disposed of the body. No gang war meant police wouldn't investigate, and the cops always knew if it was a war because the body or bodies would simply be left in the gutter in any turf conflict.

Half a block down, Joe cut through a trash-bin alley. A couple of streets later, he was certain no one was following him, so he flagged a yellow cab. As the silent cabby drove through the night streets, Joe thought about the situation. It had gained complexity swiftly. Tan's people had believed him because there were a few of those guys around, scouting the neighborhood. But who in the hell were they? If they were gangsters or even terrorists, why would they focus on him? He had nothing to do with the neighborhood crime structure. Most of his cases weren't even in the neighborhood.

It didn't make a whole lot of sense. He had the cabby drop him two blocks shy of his destination and walked the rest of the way. Some of the earliest people were already leaving for work, so there was some traffic and a few pedestrians, though it was still dark. Joe planned to be asleep by the time the sparrows were singing. He stopped at the Big Kat 24-hr convenience store and picked up a few groceries, then watched the street carefully as he approached his building. He spotted a man loitering on the street in front of Ricky Sample's Gym. Joe watched him toss a cigarette and grind it into the sidewalk. Then he got into a parked van. Joe's suspicion was immediately aroused because the guy had a cop look. He was in his forties, on the stocky side with iron-grey hair, and wearing a well-worn suit that had likely gained its wear through many long stakeouts. The van was a large metallic gray Ford E-Series with tinted windows, and

when the man opened the door, the interior light didn't go on. He got in the passenger side, and Joe could make out the shadowy figure of the driver.

Joe immediately turned left down an alley. There was a chance they hadn't spotted him yet. The only reason a surveillance van would be present was to spy on him. It was possible that another tenant in his building had attracted police attention, but unlikely. It was also rather insulting to see them do it so obviously. He felt like knocking on the van's window and giving them a lecture on how to do a proper stakeout. Obedient to common sense, he worked his way down a block and went around, entering via the back way. A couple of warehouse people were just inside the alleyway, inspecting the jimmyed door. A cruiser with its lights off sat at the far end of the alley, probably hanging around just in case anyone suspicious happened to return to the scene of the crime.

He went up the stairs to his back door and found it open. He'd been told that the bomb squad had removed the drone and secured his place. It didn't seem likely that burglars or hit men would gain entrance when cops were parked at the front and the back, but with cops like Sterling Brodie on his case, anything was possible. Another suspicious clue was that the entry had been done professionally. The door was reinforced and nearly impossible to break. They'd picked an expensive security lock. It was a mechanical lock, as in recent years, anything electronic could be cracked. Maybe the drone killers knew how to pick locks, too.

Maybe cops were inside. The situation meant going in quietly and surprising anyone present. He passed through the vestibule and found himself in his back office. He'd set it up as storage and a home for the cat. The lighting was dim but bright enough for him to see that he had come nearly face to face with a huge man wearing a dark suit and prescription Ray Bans. Joe didn't see a gun; he didn't wait to see one. He seized the man, put a knee in his gut, pushed him back up, and hammered him with a hard right to the jaw ... only to find that that man had a torso like a tree trunk and a jaw hard as steel.

Some distance separated them. They engaged. Both men did a sort of half-circle scuffle walk into the kitchen. The big man shoved Joe away, spat out some blood, and said. "You knocked my glasses off. You put filthy hands on my suit. No one puts filthy hands on my suit."

They were about to tangle again. Joe grabbed a stool with his left hand and was halfway through swinging it when someone burst through from the living room and hit the side of his neck with a stun gun. It was a very effective weapon as it took his legs out from under him, filled his head with thunder, and led to unconsciousness. When he came around, his mouth tasted like death, and he could see nothing more than bright fuzz. It was like being a computer that had been shut off and rebooted. But the reboot was painful, his teeth ached, his muscles convulsed, and his mind remained stuck in a twilight zone of bizarre confusion that slowly lifted.

Something cool and wet touched his cheeks, a pungent odor filled his nostrils, and he came alert nearly as fast as he'd gone out. He was sitting on his couch. He shot up with a start and was pushed back down. Two faces swam in his vision and slowly cleared. The first face was familiar, the big man who looked like a US Secret Service agent. He saw nothing familiar in the second face. It belonged to a woman. She was blond, attractive in a stern way, wearing an expensive gray pantsuit. He was still in his office

apartment, so they hadn't taken him anywhere, but the view from the couch showed him that they'd rifled his place and even had his laptop out and up on a cabinet. The big man had taken the liberty of making an ice pack, which he was applying to his jaw where Joe had struck him.

It pissed him off. "Breaking and entering, doing a search without a warrant, and assault ... you two will lose your badges for this."

"It's all legal," the woman chirped, her voice authoritative in an odd way.

Joe got up and went over to his laptop. "I see you couldn't get into it."

"We can," the man said. "We just didn't have time."

"What is this about? Have you people ever heard the news that police officers have to identify themselves?"

"Sure, you want ID?" the woman said. She pulled out a black passport wallet and opened it as she stepped up to him. The ID contained her photo and identified her as Velisa Newport of the Canadian Government Defense Procurement Department. Then she flipped it closed and opened it another way, and it said Velisa Newport, Canadian Security Intelligence Service."

"Spooks," Joe said. "I should have known. But it doesn't make any of this legal."

Velisa grinned, and it was the predatory sort of grin he didn't like on a man and hated on a woman, especially a woman with dimpled cheeks. "Apparently, you aren't aware of the new amendments to the Security Intelligence Service Act. This is legal so long as we have grounds for suspicion. Just about anything you might imagine is legal if we have grounds for suspicion. Any complaints you file will be buried in a national security document."

"Really, and what are those grounds for suspicion?"

The big man stepped closer. "Your ugly face is grounds zero and one. Ground two is the fact that you attacked me, demonstrating that you have something to hide."

"Shut up, Kuf," Velisa said. "We need this man's cooperation."

Joe shook his head with disgust and looked Velisa in the eye. "Are you two playing good cop, bad cop on me? Who is that guy?"

"He is Special Agent Kufner, and he is assisting me on this investigation."

"So why is the surveillance van set up out front if you people are already inside?"

"So, you noticed it," Velisa said. Her blue eyes brightened like he'd impressed her, and for some reason, he didn't like her eyes. They were a few nits too bright and unreal. "Officially, there is no van out there. Unofficially, I can tell you that it is a police van. One that Officer Sterling Brodie put on you. Now, if your view of surveillance is two gorillas with dollar-store binoculars, then it is surveillance."

"If this is a joke, it is a bad one."

“Look,” Agent Kufner said. “Maybe you aren’t getting the picture. You may be in very serious trouble. An armed drone was found in this residence, and we have full authorization in this area due to terrorist chatter.”

“Terrorist chatter,” Joe muttered, as if he couldn’t believe it.

Velisa spun half around, turned a sudden, angry face on Kufner. “Damn you, you weren’t supposed to tell him about that.”

Kufner didn’t answer; Joe did. “You won’t trace any terrorist chatter to me. I’ve never figured out how you people log every phone call, text, or whatever else exists, yet can’t trace the source of the chatter. You should have a police report. In case you weren’t informed, some idiot was trying to kill me with that Mickey Mouse grenade drone.”

“We were informed,” Velisa said. “But Officer Brodie has his suspicions regarding you. If you are on the up and up, why the security setup, why the guns and other equipment here?”

“I’m a private investigator. I also work with various security companies, testing their equipment. My guns are registered. My other job is vetting employees for sensitive jobs. All that information is available to you people, if you would bother to check.”

“Oh, we did check,” Kufner said. “In that check, we found that a portable 3D printer and a specialty drone are registered to you.”

Joe felt his heart sink. He was being set up. “That can’t be so. I’ve never worked with 3D-printed objects or with armed drones. There is no such equipment here. I’ve never heard about registering such things either.”

Velisa grinned broadly. “We know that. As you can see, we already looked. I expected to find drugs. You’re lucky I didn’t.”

“Drugs? How do drugs come into this?”

“They don’t,” Agent Kufner said. “We just figure you for the type. Up all night. Up to nothing good.”

Velisa jumped in smoothly. “You should realize that we could put paper on you and bury you at a black site right now. The only reason that hasn’t happened is camera surveillance showing that the person who registered the drone wasn’t you. Unless you are a master of disguise. And that too is an issue, because of that full disguise kit over there in your closet.”

“He isn’t that good,” Agent Kufner said. “The man who registered the drone wasn’t him.” He pulled a photograph from his suit pocket. “This is the man you sent to register it at the transport department. Who is he?”

Kufner was a sloppy agent. He’d kept the photo in his pocket, and it was partially crumpled. It had been printed from surveillance equipment that was far from state-of-the-art. Joe took the photograph and studied it. It looked like the man who had pursued him, but not quite. Almost like it was his brother or cousin. The print was so poor he couldn’t be sure. If there was a certain look that spells terrorist, this man had it ... meaning a fierce Middle Eastern look, like Algerian, Syrian, or Iranian. “Never seen him before in my life. I don’t hang out with terrorists. I didn’t even know drones could be

registered. Obviously, he went into the government office instead of registering it online because that way he could falsely identify himself as me.”

Velisa seized the moment, her eyes widening. “You say he’s a terrorist. How exactly would you know that?”

“I took one look at the picture. I also took one look at the man who tried to kill me. They look like brothers. Might even be the same guy.”

“But that’s a racist comment.”

“Are you interested in the facts or political correctness? In my defense, I can tell you that it occurred to me that if he is a person of interest to you people, he’s probably a terrorist. Another thing that enters my mind is that you got here faster than a SWAT team, with photos and who knows what else. No one works that fast. You’ve been around here looking for someone or something. If Agent Kufner’s mention of terrorist chatter is what you’re going on, maybe you are just here fishing.”

Velisa frowned severely. “Our fishing line keeps coming up with you.”

“Really. So what are you going to do? Put paper on me? Stash me at a black site? A secret trial, where you charge me with trying to kill myself with a Mickey Mouse kill drone. And after that, running outside and terrorizing the city, by shooting an alcoholic in a dark alley with a 3D-printed gun?”

Kufner grinned for once. It was a big, toothy grin. He had bits of blood on his teeth. “It doesn’t all fit together. At least not yet. If it did, you would already be in a van. It doesn’t make sense that you would send someone to register a special drone and then try to kill yourself with the invention. Someone is playing games, and if I get hold of him or them, bones will be broken, and questions will be answered.”

Joe watched in amazement as Velisa pulled out a business card. “What we want is cooperation. If you spot any persons of interest, call me. But don’t call Brodie until after we have parsed the information. The police investigation is secondary.”

“You’re probably just giving Holiday enough rope to hang himself,” Kufner said.

“What about you?” Joe said to Kufner. “Do you have a business card or even a first name?”

“My name is Jason; to you, it is Mr. Kufner. I don’t hand out business cards. If I need you, I will find you.”

Joe ignored Kufner and looked back at Velisa. His place trashed, exhaustion coming on strong, the whole night seemed unreal. Powers of reasoning were giving way to confusion. He was simply too weak to spar with spooks, so he decided a facade of cooperation was best. “Sure, I’ll contact you if anything suspicious comes up. Stirling Brodie will probably drive down a dead-end road on this one, so don’t count on getting anything much from him.”

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Chapter Three: Terrorists on the Job

Johan would be late for work, and that wasn't a major problem for the personnel director, unless he planned to discipline himself. As he looked out the sun-sparkling window, he convinced himself that being late was acceptable, which was a hard thing to do when he had fired so many people for it and had developed a thundering speech on the evils of tardiness. Productivity was another virtue he often addressed, though privately he knew many jobs, like his own, had nothing to do with productivity. Achievement was somehow hiring the right people while projecting an image of fairness to various racial and cultural groups. The company image was paramount, but as for fairness, Johan harbored no illusions of a fair world. Life was not fair, and people did not want it to be; they all wanted to steal a bigger slice of the economic pie.

He usually went in very early and left late, even though he was on a salary. He set up interviews at ungodly early hours. Sometimes, only Johan, the overnight security man, and a prospective employee were at the office. A favorite trick, it showed Johan whether a job seeker would be reliable. Being late for an early-bird interview meant blowing the interview with Johan. He liked to think of demolition work as perfectly timed, and that one person late for the show could blow the whole place to hell.

There were nice things and ugly things about the day. His intact Cadillac SUV belonged in the nice category, as did the bright sun kiss on it. It had only received minor damage, and Johan now had some money for repairs. Eating a big breakfast was another nice thing. His nightmare experience with Andras had led to the longest fast of his life. Johan believed that man could not live by beer alone, or by every word proceeding from the breath of senior management. Big Macs, Quarter-pounders, fries, and Dunkin' Donuts were also required.

He was still trying to grasp just why Andras did business in such a scary way. Sure, some people were politically incorrect, but Andras was frighteningly incorrect. If you want to buy someone, approach the person, socialize, bait with a bribe, making it sound like something good. Once the sucker is on the hook, he is sure to bite harder. Johan considered it and sadly remembered that they had done just that to him, recording his quick acceptance of the initial bribe offer. He felt no self-loathing over it. Anyone could be bought for money; he was certain of it. There was also the needle Andras had injected in the back of his neck, and the sheer fear of his brutality. They weren't taking any chances with him; it was full control.

His eyes left the window and feasted on two of the ugly things of the day, and that gave him even more understanding of Andras' scary methods. It was surprising how banal and pathetic terrorists could look when they were about everyday life. If Andras hadn't demonstrated his cruel nature, it might have been tempting to betray him and them to the authorities. He would not even consider that now, so certain was he that Andras would find a way to get him and run him through a meat grinder.

The first of the two banal losers, the man named Ali, now sat across from him at the table, not saying much. The second man, Randy, had his own table next to them. With the red ring beard shaved, a big plaid shirt, and jeans, Randy looked more like a trucker. Road hogs like him were furniture pieces in Arches outlets every day. He was of the sort that did not understand that a big man must show good table manners to avoid

the big slob label. Randy, presently wolfing down three double cheeseburgers and using a handful of napkins to brush the spillage of fries from the front of his shirt to the floor, was certainly a whole hog. But Johan wouldn't use that term unless he wanted to die right there in the Arches. Hog was not a term Muslims liked. He'd already had a problem getting Ali to enter the joint. Ali believed the burgers might contain pork.

The problem Ali had just created at the counter remained as an absurd memory. Ali had asked the pimply spiky-haired man at the counter to show him the Halal label for the burger he'd just taken a bite from, and when the reply was a snicker, he'd shouted, "This is a pig burger!"

After harassing the creepy kid, Ali stepped out and yelled, "Pig burger! Pig burger!" to the other patrons. He then threw his burger fifteen feet to splat across the table of a small bald man, who looked up, got up, and hurried out of the restaurant.

Fortunately, Randy returned after stashing his giant order on a table in a side section away from the counter. He pulled Ali away and around to the side, leaving Johan in a position where he had to pass a huge tip to avoid a police call. That became a double tip after he returned from Dunkin' Donuts with an order for Ali and himself. This was due to the no-outside-food rule. A third bill slipped away when the pimply boy, who happened to be the manager, said another key rule was that no protesters were allowed inside. In Johan's opinion, Ali resembled an oddball more than a protester. He also had a low opinion of the personnel director who had hired the kid as a manager.

There did happen to be protesters nearby in the lot out front of Starbucks, protesting the huge donations that the outlet had given to Pride parades. Ali was definitely not one of those protesters. Ali was indeed a religious extremist, but of a different variety. Where the chaps protesting at Starbucks might spray-paint an offensive tag on the restaurant window, Ali's sort would blow the restaurant sky high. However, having the restaurant people think Ali, and probably Randy and himself, were protesters was better than having them think they were criminals or terrorists.

Johan's wallet had been lightened, but he loved donuts. It pissed him off that he could not eat a burger for fear of offending Ali, yet Randy could pig out without worries. Their tendency to leave Johan out of the conversation while they conversed in a foreign language was also unnerving, because with people like them, it was impossible to know what they were considering. They could be discussing whether to cut someone's hands off in a casual tone. On the drive over, Johan had listened to a hostile speech from Ali, peppered with choice quotes from the Quran. He'd already been warned by Andras that saying anything at all regarding the Quran would be taken as offensive speech, so he'd said nothing in reply. However, he became convinced that the best way to convert people to Islam was to quote it in Arabic like Randy did, because the death of Islam in the mind of nearly any Western person came in either hearing or reading the actual insane words of the prophet.

The professional nature of these two terrorists had him very much on edge, because it was not professional at all. They hadn't even made it out of the gate without nearly bringing in the police. On the job, Randy might do okay, but Ali was a lunatic, though not enough of one to spoil the taste of a bagel with cream cheese. Ali was as intellectually dumb as a donkey. So long as he was eating sweets, in this case, chocolate-glazed

donuts, he became docile. He flashed Johan a blackened smile between donuts. It was not the sort of smile Johan preferred. It was a weird smile, almost like a flirtatious gay smile. He was certain the holy book forbade anything gay, but maybe not if it was done while killing an unbeliever like him. It didn't seem possible that these two could cruise sites in a company van without incidents and suspicion, and as he contemplated that, he saw Andras pulling up in his beat-up pickup, with Jalal in the passenger seat.

Randy grunted in acknowledgment. The parking lot was outside the window at the limits of Randy's peripheral vision, so that meant he had eyes like a hawk as well as being strong as an ox. Perhaps Ali had similar skills; it had to be so because Andras wouldn't be using him otherwise. In Ali's case, even imagining what those skills might be was frightful.

Jalal went to the counter and ordered coffee, while Andras came straight to them but took a third table and sat down. They now had the side section to themselves as other arriving patrons had all turned back and taken their trays elsewhere. This offended Johan. Nasty people who stereotyped men as a tad overweight had shunned him in the past. It had never been this bad. Johan's feeling of being ugly and scary and growing meaner because of it was new, and Andras' presence sent the scary index even higher. He thought Andras and Randy together might pass for frightening hillbillies; add in Ali with team leader Jalal, and it was hard to say what they appeared to be unless someone was casting an al-Qaeda meets the rednecks movie.

Andras didn't wait for Jalal to return from the counter. "The bad news we expected just came in. It is not as terrible as feared. Muhab is dead, but we're certain there was no contact with law enforcement."

Both Randy and Ali remained silent, as though slowly digesting this news. Both had eyes that registered disbelief. Johan spoke first. "You mean that miserable Joe Holiday managed to kill him?"

Andras shook his head. "No. It appears that Holiday got wise. He discovered the tail and brought in a Vietnamese contract killer to take Muhab out. I got the news from a contact on the street. The body will almost certainly never turn up."

Randy didn't look at all pleased. "Give me the assignment. I'll cut this Holiday into tiny pieces."

Jalal showed up at the table, holding two coffees. "No. The mission is more important, and it is underway. We have no time for Joe Holiday, but if he gets in our way, we take him out quietly."

"Muhab was a Muslim brother," Ali said. "I will kill one hundred more unbelievers to atone for his death."

"Great idea," Andras said.

"That means more attention and dedication to the job at hand," Jalal said. "Change of plans. Johan, I want you to be hands-on with these two. Set up the job titles, issue them a truck, and travel with them to aid them at the target site. I mean, target number one, designing the bombs to blow it up. We are short a man, but we can still do it easily because Ali has superior skills."

“Of course I can do it,” Ali said proudly. “I’m a better man with explosives, IEDs, detonators. Muhab lost sight of the nature of jihad. He watched too many spy movies and started playing with little drones, plastic guns, and other crusader toys. He should have stayed away from that equipment in that Nazi bunker of yours. I don’t understand why you stuck us in the place; it was like being in a prison. Now, as for bombs, it is the brute force correctly applied that does the job and kills the blasphemers. My philosophy has always been very simple Islam. Make it easy; make the biggest bang with a simple setup.”

Andras had been steadily nodding while Ali spoke. “We will set you up in a new location. Putting you in the spare side bunker was originally a cooling-off plan. Playing with explosives and devices in there was a mistake. We will now keep it simple and big as you say. I’m sure Johan will be a big help. He is a partial replacement for our third man.”

All eyes went to Johan, and he shifted uncomfortably, knowing that he was one of the blasphemers. He couldn’t decide what was worse: allowing these men out with a company vehicle or traveling with them; probably the latter, because he would not be able to escape affiliation with them. However, there was only one reply he could make.

“Yes, I will assist them,” Johan said. “This will provide an opportunity to help them fine-tune their behavior to company standards, and thus avoid suspicion. It will also provide them with knowledge of the target site by studying blueprints and other site documents. I have also thought of a way to hire them clean. We have a big job that involves moving an old cemetery. A wealthy family owns it and wouldn’t allow the purchase of the land without relocating the family plots and a big tomb. It allows me to hire experts without oversight, since there is no immediate need for explosives. Due to Randy and Ali’s expertise in such work over in the Middle East, I am bringing them in as the experts in charge of the work.”

Andras signaled his approval. Ali grunted. Randy burped. “First order of business inside is to get hold of enough explosive material for the job,” Jalal said.

“Sure. I will work on it,” Johan said. “But with your deadline, it is difficult.”

“Okay, we part ways,” Jalal said smoothly. “There will be no further meetings of all of us in public. The plan is to move lightning fast.”

Johan cleared the trash and disposed of it. Outside the window, Andras and Jalal got in the pickup and rattled off the lot. A few minutes later, Johan led the other two out, and he got in his vehicle, thankful that their exit had been quiet. The pimply-faced manager was out front having a smoke, and Johan saw him exhale and grin. It irritated him that the manager now found the situation amusing, but at least he probably wouldn’t bother checking the plate number, which Johan had learned from a burglary at one of the company sites. Criminals could be nabbed right away if just one member of the public would get a license plate number. Yet they rarely did. Instead, they remembered everything irrelevant and offered numerous incorrect descriptions. He figured that the public’s stupidity was the criminal’s great advantage. As for terrorists, they were actually killing their best friends. If not for the unreasonable fear the public had of terrorists, and their panicked reactions and inability to take simple steps to escape or fight back, terrorists would have very little power.

Enlightenment is often seeing one's own flaws, and Johan saw that if he hadn't been a unit of the conformist masses, he might have found a way to fight Andras off right from the get-go. Very few people broke loose from the herd and fought back, and often they were oddballs like the Starbucks protesters, who now came to mind because they were moving in and cutting off his exit to the main road. Three of them held a giant banner, blocking both the entrance and the exit. More of them had sealed the access to Dunkin's and a few other choice outlets on the strip locals called Fast Food Heaven. A big heavyweight protester stood in front of the banner, and he had his hands up, ordering Johan to stop.

"So that's why that Arches manager was grinning," Johan mumbled as he braked. Then he found himself stopped, Ali in the front passenger side, both of them with a view of the bulky protester and the huge GOD HATES GAYS banner behind him.

The big protester turned around and hollered at a couple of cars trying to enter. Johan knew the protesters were an extreme Christian group, though the big man was wearing a Teamsters Union jacket.

"Who are these people?" Ali asked.

"They're supposed to be Christians," Johan replied. "But that big guy doesn't look much like your usual televangelist."

Johan had been about to get out of the car. Usually, incidents like this one sent him into an immediate state of rage. Today, everything felt dreamlike, and he was unnaturally calm, simply because he knew he had to handle things and sweet-talk his way out of this situation before Ali and Randy decided to take charge. If he were to let them get out of control, Andras would blame him and detonate the tiny explosive device he had injected into the back of his neck. It was all about control; Johan knew he had to walk on eggshells and please Andras. At least until he did some research to find out if such a device was possible. He firmly believed that Andras had simply injected a sliver or tiny needle that hurt like a bee sting, all so he could bullshit him with threats of frying his spinal cord. His company doctor would know. But Johan would ask about such a thing and not show him the sting. He'd let Doc Weiss take some routine blood tests just to make sure he hadn't been poisoned in any way.

"I'll take care of this problem," Johan said calmly. He opened his door, then glanced at Ali as he was getting out and quickly got back in. Ali had pulled a curved, very expensive knife from his coat. It looked like Ali Baba's jeweled cutthroat knife. This new incarnation of Ali grinned and stared as though in a trance. The trance, Johan figured, was the preliminary ritual to murderous action. "Please put the knife away," he said. "I said I will deal with this."

"Those people are crusaders," Ali replied, his voice calm and even. "I have cut the throats of crusaders. They are calling us names with that sign. What does such a name mean?"

Neither Johan nor Randy answered verbally, but Randy used an explicit hand gesture to reply, and that caused Ali's eyes to pop with horror.

Johan gulped, preparing for the worst. Then Randy cheerfully said. "Cool it with the knife, Ali. Just give me a minute, and I will beat the crap out of this crusader."

Before Johan could reply, Randy got out quickly and stepped up to the front of the vehicle. Johan got out just as fast, and Ali followed. Johan was already sweating unnaturally, and he wiped his brow with relief when he saw that Ali had put the knife away. With a better view of the situation, he saw that the protesters had succeeded in creating chaos by moving in and blocking the entire highway as well as entrances and exits to a few fast-food joints. Horns tooted, people were gathering, and some of them were truckers who were more than a match for the god-hates-gays protesters. The protesters came across as a motley crew of oddballs, and the others were not as strong as the one blocking Johan. A couple of skinny-as-chickens old women were shouting, and there were a few spaced-out old men in the gang, too. They coalesced to form a completely ridiculous lot, nearly all of them toting picket signs with idiotic slogans.

The big protester ignored the approach of Johan, Randy, and Ali as he ordered the three holding the huge banner to turn it around so that it faced the main road and the chaos as people emerged from vehicles and fast-food joints. The crowd grew larger as rubberneckers kept appearing, almost like magic, and Johan obeyed the crowd's pull as he led Randy and Ali to the front of the body, opposing the protesters. It was as if someone pulling strings in the sky had created a face-off of two groups of people. The offended public was the bigger body and was led by Johan and his terrorists.

Shouting back and forth began when a few mean truckers came to the front lines. The big teamster the protesters had recruited provided a serious obstacle, and no one other than maybe Randy was big enough to take him on alone. Perhaps the other protesters lacked physical strength, but they did not come up short in terms of insanity. Anger rippled through the crowd of stalled motorists, but most of them did not want to scrap with loonies who might use their picket signs as weapons.

Johan looked around, took in as much as he could see, and was thankful that no real media was present, which might keep it off the news. But it might not keep it off social media, and it would be damaging if some sap in the crowd recorded something that went viral ... something that featured Johan and his two terrorists as the three stooges.

"Oh shit," Johan muttered as he discovered that his brief look around had allowed Randy to step forward. He was now facing off with the teamster gorilla, and the other protesters were peppering him with abuse. A male protester, about sixty, with longish gray hair and dressed in a business suit, lunged in and tried to strike Randy with his sign. That didn't work for him because Randy yanked it away, broke it, put it down, and stepped on it. Johan saw this happen while holding Ali's arm and pulling him back so he could not go directly after the protester.

He succeeded in holding Ali back, but Randy and the Teamster were now growling at each other, and the crowd had gone silent. This appeared to be a form of ritual combat, in which the two competitors attempted to prove their fierce, beastly nature. Johan, with his hand firmly on Ali's arm, could not move forward to stop the fight. No one else wanted to stop it either. The group of truckers beside him suddenly came to life, and not with helpful action, but with betting action that began with one of them saying, "Fifty down on the Teamster, any takers?"

There were only two takers, and their replies signaled the opening of the first round as the two fighters stepped forward and engaged.

One man shouted, "Traitor! Betting on the gay haters instead of the good people!"

The crowd ignored that comment, and Ali breathed a whisper into Johan's ear. "Now you will see how a Muslim destroys a crusader."

Johan doubted that the burly teamster even knew what a crusader was, and he could have pointed out that Muslims were not supposed to be fighting on behalf of the gays. If he said nothing, it was probably because it made little difference now that everything had turned into insanity and spectators shouting over a wrestling match.

The match began slowly as the grapplers engaged in a test of strength. The gay-hating teamster stepped back and spat on the street before engaging a second time. Randy initially overpowered him, but was then thrown back. A series of blows followed as both fighters tested rib-cage strength. Randy gained a temporary advantage by striking higher with a hard punch to the teamster's neck.

Johan winced at the thudding punches and sheer brutality of the two men. A blow like that one to the neck would have killed him, yet the teamster recovered right away, blew out some more spittle, and went back into action. They went down hard, rolling on the pavement, and the teamster came up on top. Randy turned him over and got some hard blows in before being pushed off. During this action, the enthusiasm of the crowd had moved from early bloodthirsty excitement to fearful gasps as they realized the two men were killing each other. If this fight were about gays, the ring stars were into S&M. If it were about crusaders, the story would be of two men on a crusade of hate and murder. Perhaps both men thought heaven would be the reward if it became a death match, with the teamster thinking Saint Pete would hold open the gate for his bruised soul, while Randy believed fifty virgins would patch up his stinking corpse.

Fortunately, for both men, the grave wasn't quite ready to suck them down. Instead, the cavalry arrived with a howl of sirens and squealing tires. Four police cars arrived on scene, and Johan's worries changed from fears of Randy getting himself killed or killing someone else to the possibility of being swept up with protesters and jailed.

Panicked, Johan let go of Ali and charged forward, coming up from behind to jump on Randy's back. Johan's weight staggered Randy when he had been about to lunge in at the teamster. Rather than take advantage of this, the teamster looked around and saw the police cars coming to a stop. He did not attempt to re-engage with Randy. He backed off, and the other protesters swarmed around him at the large banner.

This was now about avoiding assault and other charges, and without doubt, every single protester would say that Randy had attacked their man, who was peacefully blocking the road. Most of the road, exits, and entrances were now clear, as the smaller groups of protesters had rushed over when the fight started. Johan expected the police to walk in calmly and do their job of convincing spectators to get in their cars and leave. He assumed they would decide which protesters to arrest.

Exiting fast was now the priority, so Johan broke away from Randy, swung around in front of him, and said, "We should get Ali and get in the car. I'll back out of this and see if we can get away without police trouble."

Randy nodded and pawed at his bloody nose. Johan looked for Ali and saw that he had moved deeper into the crowd, arguing with a man. Shouting started, and people

gathered around them. Johan observed the police slowly encircling everyone, but they couldn't get over near his vehicle, so backing up into the Arches and trying to drive around and out the other way remained a feasible option. But they had to get Ali, and Randy was already taking action, plunging ahead through the crowd to reach him.

The police made their move at the same moment, and it was not what Johan expected. Two officers rushed over from the other side of the road. Each man carried what looked like a small red fire extinguisher. It took about two seconds for Johan to discover that the extinguishers were pepper spray. One cop sprayed the protest group, and the other swept his spray back and forth through the crowd. Chaos ensued as people screamed and ran. More cops hurried in to begin making arrests, and a struggle broke out.

Randy reached Ali and checked the man he'd been arguing with aside and down onto the pavement. Johan ran towards them, hollering, "This way, this way!" His shouts attracted the attention of one of the pepper-spray cops, and he managed to fire a stream of it more than five yards to hit Johan in the face.

Johan had never been pepper-sprayed, and he expected some minor effects and not the severe burning that actually occurred. He stumbled about in a circle, gasping, and that made it worse because sucking in the residue was like sucking in fire. His hands went to his face, and he quickly pulled them away. People were bumping into him, and he was hit hard and knocked over. Then the trampling began. Johan felt like screaming, but he had no vocal cords, and when he opened his mouth, a painful rasp emerged. It wasn't long, even by the standards of severe pain, and then he was being pulled up and dragged. He assumed he was being dragged to a police car, but as he was pushed into the back of the vehicle, he heard Randy's voice and felt him taking his car key from his pocket.

Because Johan overheated and broke into a sweat easily, especially when someone on the road pissed him off, he always had a case of spring water in the back. His left hand hit the case after he was pushed in, so he knew it was his car. He tore at the plastic wrapping like a desperate animal, popped a top, and began pouring water on his face and neck. He soaked his hair and used a second bottle to gargle and spit, and slowly felt the pain ease.

The car reversed a good way and jolted him as it turned and stopped. Johan slowly poured another bottle over his eyes and then sat up fully and tried to see. Two blurry figures were in the front, the bigger one at the wheel.

"Where are we?" Johan said.

"Behind the pig-burger store," Ali said.

"The police, what about the police?"

Randy answered. "They brought in a wagon, and some protesters and other people are being put inside it. So we wait here, and then drive out when it's clear."

Johan heard a cigarette lighter snap. A horrid odor filled the car. "Shit, what are you smoking? I don't allow smoking in my car."

"Turkish cigarettes," Ali said. "We are relaxing while we wait."

“Yeah, relax,” Johan said, certain that if the pepper spray didn’t ruin his upholstery, the Turkish cigarettes would.

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Joe leaned on the windowsill and studied the cloudy weather. The clouds were dark gray, scudding, and releasing a fine misty rain. He felt surprisingly good after a day of rest, and he had free security protecting him from the arrival of any foul play. Sterling Brodie had placed an undercover car out back with one man inside it. Parked up the alley, the van was hidden behind a trash bin. Joe had spotted it from the rooftop. Brodie wasn’t around unless he was in the surveillance van that remained out front by Ricky Sample’s Gym.

It wasn’t clear whether they were expecting action or attempting to scare him into staying at home. He decided it was both and maybe more. He didn’t trust Velisa Newport or Jason Kufner, and he was certain they were using Brodie and the local police, even though they said otherwise. The various police organizations collaborated in terrorist investigations, even if it was just information sharing. The information would move up the food chain in this case, and Newport would collect every detail as federal cops felt that humongous amounts of data solved cases. Brodie would likely do anything to move up, and aiding Newport in her investigation would look like a way into Spookville and prestige. Yet Newport would be just using Brodie as a presence to keep Joe pinned in his office, killing off any troublesome gumshoe investigations. Brodie could also notify her immediately if any unsavory characters appeared.

Joe knew that if he went out, Brodie’s man would follow him religiously, hoping he would lead them to something. It covered all the bases for Newport and Kufner while they were elsewhere, following up on whatever investigation they were working on. There hadn’t been any past terrorist attacks in the local area, so perhaps they were creating work. Maybe they had statistics or recordings of chatter, as they called it, which pointed to an imminent attack. That attack would have to be on a newsworthy target, because killing Joe Holiday would not rate as a terror attack. The media would immediately cover it as a revenge killing or an investigation gone sour.

As Joe scanned the apartment, the cat took his place at the window. The room was back in neat order, and he had checked everything over. Nothing had been removed other than the bomb and most of the broken window, which he had taped over with heavy opaque plastic. He decided it was time to go out, so he fished in the closet for a few items. The cops would not expect him to take a gun while being followed, so he did, picking a Colt Mustang. Polymer, it held six .380 rounds and was easy to conceal. The coat he picked was fully reversible, and he put it on with the blue color out. Reversed, it was gray like the day outside. A few small disguise items were contained in an inner pocket, and he might need them. He had no big plans other than to see if there were any easy leads. The gun likely wouldn’t be needed, as he didn’t plan to do anything illegal. He knew that the cops would probably only follow and watch him.

Joe went out the back way and down the stairs. At the bottom, he made a point of looking around furtively to inspire the undercover cop parked up the alley. Joe’s car

wasn't parked at the office, and he wasn't taking it anyway. He was going some short steps down the alley to the Beech Brothers warehouse. The police would have wrapped up their investigation and taken any camera surveillance or forensic clues, so Joe was fishing for leftovers.

The side door of Beech Brothers had been repaired, and a new scare camera was mounted high above it. Fresh footprints were in the mud, so they had just put it up. Joe strolled to the front and noticed the usual warehouse loiterers were absent. The old warehouse had probably always been a warehouse. Its facade was refurbished in red brick with a narrow lawn, a small garden, and a fountain. The truck entries and a number of loading docks were on the west side. Cops would walk up and into the management office, but Joe didn't do that. Instead, he chose an employee's entrance that looked as if it had been embossed into the wall as an afterthought. It wasn't marked, and it wasn't locked. The security was inside, and Joe found himself in a dingy vestibule with a hand scanner and a locked door. A narrow window beside the door allowed a view of a security guard at the desk on the other side of the entry. The man was an obvious retiree, working out some of his later years at the dead-end warehouse. He saw Joe but continued reading the sports section of a newspaper. Joe tapped on the glass, and the guard stepped over and slid open the dusty window.

"I'm Joe, Sonny's friend. I found him the other night."

"Sonny hasn't returned to work yet. He's still in the hospital. The head injury has some complications. The police already spoke to the management in detail. They have been through this place. Shut it down most of yesterday. There's nothing you can do that they haven't done."

"I can ask you a couple of questions."

"Okay, you can come inside, but you can't go into the warehouse area. It's a safety and security law."

The old guard unlocked the door with a button on his desk, and Joe turned right, into the guard office. He found that he didn't have to enter the warehouse to see it. The security station was a cheap pre-fab office construct, and most of the north wall was a huge window that allowed the guard a view into the warehouse. Joe's impression was of an open area like an airport hangar. He could see some of the ceiling-high metal shelving off to the right and much of the vast open concrete floor next to the truck docks. Large boxes and pallets were stacked on the docks, and he saw workers in dark blue overalls unloading one truck. The guard also had camera monitors, but they faced the guard, and Joe couldn't see the displays.

The guard put down his newspaper and looked expectantly at Joe. He had jowls like an old bulldog, a rough shave, and serious gray eyes. "If there's something you need to know, you could just go to the hospital and ask Sonny."

"He called in and told you what he knew, if anything. He's a security guard and would automatically report to his superiors."

"I'm not his boss, but he did call, and we've all been briefed. He didn't see much. You know he was hit from behind. He didn't hear the break-in and didn't realize the man had gotten inside. He was on patrol when he got hit. Sonny says someone inside had to be

involved because the alarm on that side door was shut off from inside. That door has a silent alarm that alerts the night guard on his cell phone. No matter where he is in the warehouse, he knows a break-in is in progress. At least he does when it hasn't been disabled."

"My guess is the burglar didn't steal anything other than the Bulldog security uniform."

"How did you know that?"

"The warehouse wasn't the target; it is just at a convenient location. The burglar had me targeted and wanted to use this location to stage something against me. After breaking in, he probably prowled about and found a uniform in the change room or a locker. It is a convenient disguise, and it stymies the police. Your company sends guards to several sites, and many of them would have done shifts here. The police will have to waste time looking through the roster of employees of your security company, and that is too many people. It would be the same deal with warehouse employees."

"Of course, they would look at employees. Who else would be inside to disable the alarm?"

"When I look down there and see all those loading docks, it is easy to see that many truckers and others come inside. There are also contractors and people that the management brings in. Think about those people. I saw the burglar jump on the back of an old pickup truck and escape as it drove away. Do you know of anyone visiting here like a contractor with a beat-up pickup?"

"The police didn't say anything about a pickup. Now that you mention it, I do remember one. Last week. Our loading docks are for big rigs exclusively. No cars or pickups, and when someone illegally parks, I see it on camera. They are either present and move when asked, or we tow them away."

"Do you remember who owned the pick-up?"

"Not by name. It had no corporate logo on it either. The man parked it in the way, and the window was open, so I reached in and took a business card off the dashboard. Something Waste Management. The name slips my mind. I didn't get the man's name, but found that he was with Mr. Pittman, the warehouse manager, touring the warehouse."

"Could I talk to Mr. Pittman?"

"Definitely not. I have specific instructions to keep you out. We all do. You're Joe Holiday. I recognized you when you entered. I know you saved Sonny's ass, that's the only reason I'm talking to you."

"Who banned me from the place?"

"The top cop notified all of us. The big man, Detective Jason Kufner, head of homicide."

"So he's homicide now. Never mind, forget about him. The man driving the pickup; you know anything about him?"

"I know more than I want to know about him, and don't even know his name. Ungainly man with a mangled arm and a similar attitude. Told me he would break my legs if I

touched his truck. He was waiting for Mr. Pittman to discuss a recycling deal on some of the old appliances. I left him alone because he had business with the warehouse. Wizard, that was the name on the card – Wizard Waste or Wizard Recycling.”

“I’ll pass that information on to the police,” Joe said as he passed him his card. “If you see that man around, give me a call.”

Joe strolled back out into the gloomy day, satisfied with the lead. He did not intend to pass the information on to the police when he could look into it himself. He walked over to the side drive-in and studied the loading dock and several open roll-up doors. There wasn’t any security that would effectively stop someone clever from getting inside to disable an alarm, and the recycling man had business with the warehouse. What he didn’t have was a known motive for killing a person, and Joe was certain he didn’t know the man.

As he walked away, he checked his back and the passing cars but did not see anyone following him. The only person who troubled him was a woman standing out front of the new Coffee Beanery franchise across the road. She did not fit the scenery, being an alternative type with a Gothic look – short, dark hair, a pale face, black lips, and a thin, model-like figure. She wore a fashionable long, dark coat and ankle boots. A female cop wouldn’t be that thin and fashionable, and the only reason Joe felt uneasy about her was the way she had glanced at him. Even from across the road, he saw recognition in her expression. It made him certain she knew who he was and had been waiting for him to exit the warehouse. Joe was used to casual glances from women, but this one’s eyes lit up like the rare butterfly she planned on snap-flattening in her specimen book had just appeared.

Joe headed down the street away from the warehouse, and he didn’t look back. He walked three blocks at a slow pace, crossed the road, and went south a few more blocks. If anyone was tailing him, they had improved their skills. He saw no one. Checking out the recycling joint was one idea, but he couldn’t exactly take his own car. The idea was to investigate without anyone knowing, because in this case, he did not trust any of the players. Sanderson came to mind. His companies, Killshot Security and Cygni Innovations, both had vans. Using a van with Killshot lettered on it would be ridiculous, but he had used Cygni vans in the past. The beauty of it was that you could park the van anywhere, and most people would think the Cygni Innovations logo belonged to a drapery or design company. Sanderson had chosen the name for his security design company, and probably hadn’t realized that few people knew that Cygni was the name of a near-Earth star. Cygni designed spacey security gear that was usually superior to the idiotic drone-capture net. Ironically, the odd device had proved a lifesaver on its first and only use.

Joe stopped and was about to flag a cab. A gray undercover cop car breezed past as he stood on the curb. The reason he knew it was undercover was reflections from a mirrored part of the rear plate, where one of the numbers hid the infrared camera. He saw the police undercover van, which was a similar shade, ease into a parking space a block back. In the other direction, the thin woman stood next to the Penny Arcade clothing store. She blended in so well there that she nearly passed for a street mannequin. Joe felt like shaking his head at its absurdity. It was like a bad movie where

the bad guys could be identified because they were in black and white when the surroundings were in color. A fast-paced movie too, because abracadabra and they'd gone from invisible to in his face.

By instinct, he did not like the woman; yes, she was attractive, but too skilled for his liking. She had positioned herself ahead of him so that he would stroll right past her, or would have had he not stopped and gone to the curb. A cop wouldn't do that, but a person who wanted to shoot or stab him up close would do exactly that.

If there was to be any confrontation, Joe decided to choose the battleground. He flagged a cab, it pulled over, and he got in. "Bulldog Security, their head office. Do you know where it is?"

"Sure mon, I know," the cabby replied, his accent Jamaican.

"I have a security problem. The faster you get me there, the bigger the tip will be."

Money talks, but it was the cabby's knowledge of the city and his ruthless demolition driving that made it more than chatter. The speedy drive was scenic in its display of near collisions that were often near misses with larger vehicles. Tailing such a cabby would be difficult, and escaping the unwanted fellow travelers was one purpose of the trip. Perhaps the cabby would make things easier for him. In a minute, he would find out, as they were almost there.

The cab slowed as they passed a small garden park with tall maples at its perimeter. Then they were back in the concrete jungle as they stopped at the front of an office building, shaped like a large rectangle of gray marble and glass, with semi-mirror glass windows set in vertical rectangles. Another large rectangle of deeper gray marble set into the front composed the entryway into a broad open lobby. In this case, simplicity created an elegant effect because everything was new and modern. Joe saw it as the opposite of the building containing his office, where simplicity was synonymous with dust, decay, and ghostly creaking.

Joe counted out some cash. "Do you know which floor Bulldog is on?"

"Every floor, mon ... they own the whole place."

"I see. I mean, I see that they've moved up from the back streets."

"It's condos. They have built so many condos, and Bulldog gets the security contracts. They in public housing now, too."

A strong breeze blew a scattering of autumn leaves over the open front court as Joe strode across it. The immediate interior featured open flooring of huge, polished ceramic tiles and a monster concierge desk. A big piece of lobby art might have been another ceramic tile, only pricey and mounted on the wall. Joe glanced at it long enough to confirm that he'd failed art in school and did not understand modern art. A mix of people, from business types to job seekers in casual clothing and uniformed security guards, populated the lobby. Joe approached the concierge desk. Faced with gleaming silver steel, it resembled a fortification more than a desk. The woman staffing it was not the usual Bulldog Security soldier, nor was she wearing one of their overstated security uniforms. A tall black woman, she had robust breasts that were secured by a broad counter no masher would ever be able to reach across. She wore a white top with a

black skirt and looked fit enough to tangle with rough customers. The only indication she worked for Bulldog was a tiny pin on her top. She was busy, talking on her cell phone to a job applicant. There would be a wait, so Joe turned and put his elbows on the counter as he looked out the lobby windows.

The surveillance van was just passing out front, and if it had managed to follow his cabby, the woman and the undercover cop had, too. It wasn't surprising news, and he'd led them here to get rid of them. They would be certain he was investigating a lead that brought him to Bulldog. They might expect tricks, like Joe attempting to ditch them by strolling out in uniform with other guards, so he was going to put them to the test. He would soon see if his fast disguise could pass the test.

The concierge ended her phone call, so he turned to address her. Most women did not feature breasts quite that large. Trying to pretend he wasn't aware of them was difficult. They were a definite job asset when working in a place like Bulldog, and maybe insured. Her broad smile carried more than a sexual hint.

Joe wasn't shopping for a date, so it threw him off, and he had to clear his throat before asking, "Where are job applications accepted in this building?"

"You're at the right place. We have three job streams with openings. Now I recommend you apply where you have experience and are suitable."

Joe doubted he would be suitable for any security company job beyond the freelance stuff he did with alarms and systems. Nearly all jobs required regimentation he couldn't provide, and he didn't need a job. He was just killing some time and watching the street. Without doubt, the heel nippers following him would come to the desk once he left it. They would want to know his line of inquiry and his location in the building.

Joe returned her never-ending smile. "Perhaps I'll let you be the judge. Which job stream do you feel suits me? I mean, I'm sure you have tips you give out to job seekers."

The quick brush off Joe expected didn't come. Instead, she put both palms on the desk and leaned forward, causing Joe to fight to keep his eyes on her face and off her breasts, which was hard to do when they looked like they were about to burst free of the top. "They're doing immediate hires for the new Public Housing Mobile Force. They just set up the office over on Delaware Street, if you know that area."

"Sure, I know the area. I did an impromptu run through it the other night. Sort of an after-midnight thing. Sometimes I can't sleep at night."

"That would be a qualification right there," she said, sincerely. "The mobile force will be covering that large public housing area near there. You could be part of an action team, making late-night arrests, clearing criminal trash out of the neighborhood. It pays our best hourly wage."

"Wow," Joe said, thinking that if he cleared all of the trash off the streets in that neighborhood, there would be no one left.

"It's a great job," she replied. "You can apply right here, fourth floor."

“Sure,” he said as she leaned away. Then he watched for the fraction of a second it took her to pull an application from under the counter.

She leaned across the desk again and gave him a foxy wink. “There’s a special reward I have on offer if you come back to collect after the first week.”

“I’ll buy that,” Joe said, and then he returned the wink, turned, and headed for the elevator bank.

The elevators were so slow that he would have done better to take the stairs. He slapped the rolled application against his leg and waited in the gathering crowd, wondering how many people such a sucker job would eat up. He could see the surveillance van across the courtyard, parked in plain view. The same man he’d seen the first time when it had parked by Ricky Sample’s Gym was emerging from it. Joe saw the man looking about as he emerged. Since he most certainly knew where Joe was, it wasn’t clear what he was looking for. Perhaps he had spotted the young woman and was checking whether she showed.

Two elevators arrived, and Joe got in without seeing any more. He didn’t go to the fourth floor but stepped off on the sixth floor. The elevator had a camera, so he didn’t want to stay on this floor. A broad, bright lobby was outside the elevator, and it led down to an elegant lounge that took up the entire floor. It had several areas with luxurious seating and was in use by security management and other security suits. They were holding small meetings in a few of the areas with what were probably clients. Natural light streamed in the windows from the north and south, and in the center, a silver railing with clear glass panels marked off a large rectangular area. One could step up to the railing and see security worker bees in their work areas in another large open floor below.

Joe headed straight through for a far exit to the stairwell. He wasn’t impressed. Bulldog was certainly raking in the dough, no doubt eating half the wages of grunts like Sonny and using the money for management perks and profit. Keeping his head down, he went unnoticed as people focused solely on each other and laptop displays. He stepped out into the stairwell and went up two floors to a better scene, since this floor had standard offices. It also had a squeaky-clean staff washroom. Inside, he pulled out his disguise kit, took off his coat, reversed it, and adjusted the special collar. The next part of the fast disguise was a generic blue baseball cap with a wig attached, so he could simply put it on and make his hair longer and dirtier brown. A small vial of vodka from his coat pocket served as back-of-the-neck aftershave. He used a kit to stick a nasty scar on his right cheek and put on a pair of reading glasses that changed the color of his eyes. A special buff changed the tone of his shoes from black to muddy brown, and that was it; he was finished just as a square-headed Bulldog exec stepped into the washroom.

Joe ignored him and checked himself over in the mirror. He no longer looked like Joe Holiday but more like a rough-streets Joe, and the executive agreed because he stopped before turning into the urinals and confronted him aggressively, seizing his shoulder and turning him.

“Got a reason for being in here, Mac?”

This man was Joe's size, the suit an ugly, ill-fitting seersucker. He squeezed Joe's shoulder with an iron grip. Wincing, pretending it hurt, Joe said. "I ain't Mac. Just chillin', man. Hangin' around, lookin' for a job."

"Yeah, well, chill somewhere else, like the fourth floor, where they interview bad merchandise like you." He forcibly turned Joe and shoved him toward the exit. "I see you up here again, and I'll personally bounce you out the lobby doors."

"Easy, easy," Joe said, and he went out the door without turning back. A few steps down the hall, he added a slump to his shoulders and sucked in his chest. He felt that the small confrontation was better than a whole afternoon of staring in the mirror. If the man saw him as a lowlife, things were working. Dressing down was often the best disguise. People did not spend time looking over a person they found unappetizing. Usually, they glanced and then glanced away. Only a large security type or a cop would be offended enough to confront such a person.

Taking a stairwell, he went down to the second floor and then out into an automated cafeteria area. Its front window overlooked the entry court, and he saw both the van and an undercover police car. This wasn't the same car that had been in the alley or the one that appeared by the warehouse. It was Sterling Brodie's car. He couldn't tell if Brodie was inside it, but he wasn't in the outside court. Perhaps he was already inside the building. The mysterious woman didn't show on the street, so maybe she'd observed the police tail and been scared off.

Turning from the window, Joe sat at a lunch table with eight chairs and two other occupants. They were at the far end and immediately got up with their pizza slices and moved, the woman giving him a disgusted look, like maybe he smelled like more than vodka. He began to wonder if he really did look that bad and decided it was time to exit. He had wanted to sit in the building a bit on the idea that the longer they sat outside, the less observant they'd become, but decided that leaving right away would be better because they would have sharper eyes on a building search than they would outside.

He found his way to the elevator and waited. The elevator opened first, and the surveillance cop with the iron-gray hair was one of the four passengers. He looked right at Joe, and his eyes showed no sign of recognition. Joe had seen the man in the dark the first time, but up close, he got the feeling that he wasn't a city cop. Too much experience, pain, and stress showed in his facial aging. His eyes were sharp but tired, so he was likely another one of Velisa Newport's spooks, but one that did real street work.

The elevator closed, and an empty one opened, going to the lobby. He got in thinking that both spooks and Brodie being on him might add up if he were the reincarnation of Osama bin Laden. Perhaps his first assessment had been correct. The spooks had some data that led them to be looking for terrorist activity, but they didn't know what it was and thought he might lead them to it. If so, they were following a dead lead because unless he stumbled onto something, he would take them nowhere. The worst thing about it was that if something was going on, they were off the track and missing things.

The lobby was bustling, and Joe strolled to the concierge desk, waited a minute behind another man, and gruffly asked for a job application, which he received. It was the same woman at the desk, but she didn't recognize him or offer any smile or instructions. She simply sniffed, brushed him off, and glimmered with smiles for another man approaching the counter.

Joe turned and strolled slump-shouldered to the exit without incident. He stopped at the edge of the courtyard in the blow of leaves and took a solid look around without making it obvious. There were a few smokers. His mental notepad recorded one suspicious man near the street corner, pretending to thumb-monkey on his cell phone when he was really watching the building. This man did not have the look of a cop or a spook. Olive skin, all black clothing, thick dark hair, thin like a junky, and with a long weasel face. Perhaps the woman's tag team partner, maybe not.

Joe headed into a brisk wind, holding his hat at one point. He crossed the open court in the direction of the surveillance van and Brodie's car, which was parked a ways from it. The street was bustling; the gloomy day enhanced his disguise, and things looked good.

Then Sterling Brodie emerged from his vehicle like a man in a hurry. The expression on his face was a light shade of pissed off, and he strode straight into the courtyard, directly toward Joe. He wasn't in casuals but wore a tailored gray suit. The Bulldog building had a higher percentage of people of the black and mulatto skin colors, and Brodie looked almost exactly like some of the suits he'd seen inside. Joe doubted Brodie had any genuine business there and wondered if he'd come from a court appearance. Even though it seemed certain Brodie had made him, Joe kept walking, slump-shouldered and with a slight limp. Brodie's beeline toward him continued, and he scowled as he continued on right past him and over to the lobby entrance.

Biting his lip, Joe fought off a snicker and kept walking. Brodie hadn't recognized him and was going into the building to look for him. And Brodie had a fan, because weasel-face on the corner took Brodie's entrance as his cue to head over quickly. Brodie walked as a man headed to an important event, but Weasel Face wasn't a cop, so it wasn't clear why he would follow Brodie. This whole thing was becoming a ridiculous parade of one outfit following the other, and Joe had tired of carrying the baton. He assumed that Sterling Brodie didn't like the idea of Joe asking questions at Bulldog and was moving to shut down any unauthorized investigation. He would also want to know if there was any Bulldog connection to his case.

The next obstacle was the surveillance van. At least one man would be in the van and watching. Maybe more. As Joe got closer, that proved true. He could see a man sitting at the front in the driver's side ... just enough to note that he was tall and slim. Not wanting to pass too close, Joe angled his walk so he would reach the sidewalk a few yards past the back of the van, and he was just taking his first step onto the sidewalk when the situation changed from a test of his disguise into a confusing and violent event.

He heard a gunshot, and it was from the Bulldog building. He spun on his heel and looked across the courtyard as more gunshots sounded. He couldn't see inside due to reflections on the glass. Joe could hear only one gun, and the only reason he didn't write off the possibility of two shooters was the appearance of suppressors in the

neighborhood. A gaggle of people came running out the front doors, and it became a steady stream.

The spook that had remained in the surveillance van was already out and running. He didn't even bother to close the van door, and he had his Glock out. He was about ten feet from the van when the rear of it exploded in flames.

Joe ducked farther back from it. The entire rear of the van was burning, and it had been a bomb, but of the firebomb type with no shrapnel or meat to the explosion. The spook that had emerged from it stopped and looked back. He remained there, torn about whether to return to it or keep heading toward the Bulldog building. The building won out, and for several seconds Joe became occupied, lifting and pulling aside an elderly woman who had fallen on the sidewalk near the van. He carried her and himself to a distance that would save them both when the van's gas tank exploded.

A front window shattered at Bulldog, and a cloud of dense smoke emerged with the shattered glass. There had been no explosion there, so it was a smoke bomb, and the reason became apparent. The weasel-faced man in black came out through the broken window, bursting through the smoke at a run. He carried a gun with a suppressor, and he turned as he ran, firing two shots back through the broken window. The spook from the van altered his run through the courtyard to stop the man, and he tried to imitate him by firing a shot as he ran. That turned out badly for him as he tripped, fell, and the shot went wild, causing an armed security man coming through the smoke in pursuit to turn and run back in. No doubt, the wild shot was now keeping any pursuing Bulldog security inside on the idea that there were more shooters outside that would pick them off.

Weasel Face was now dashing across the courtyard toward the side of the building, like he was going to cut through the small park to the back street. At the same time, another figure staggered through the broken window and out of the smoke. It was Brodie. He'd been shot in the leg and was in a hurry to absorb more enemy fire. He had his gun out but couldn't fire it, as there was no clear shot at the weasel.

Joe wished he could walk away, but instead took off at a sprint as he pursued Weasel-Face. His baseball cap and wig flew from his head with a gust of wind, and he was again cursing the fact that every opponent these days could run faster than he could. A glance to the side showed the spook from the van racing over to aid Brodie, so he returned his focus on Weasel Face. He didn't have to outrun him because it turned into a duel as Weasel Face pivoted as he ran through the grass at the side of the building. He saw Joe in pursuit and halted to shoot. Joe did the same, skidding down on one knee, pulling the Colt. Both men fired, and one of the shots winged Joe's coat at the shoulder; another went wild. One of Joe's shots missed, and then the duel came to an abrupt end. Joe's second shot hit the man in the face. It was messy, ugly, but Joe didn't have to look at it for long because a fraction of a second later, another bullet hit the Weasel Face in the upper body.

Joe suddenly realized there was a third shooter – the woman. He swung around a maple tree, was whipped by bush branches, and a shot winged him. She was attempting to kill him, and the weasel was already dead. From a crouch, Joe moved out into the open and then back to cover in a quick second. Another shot narrowly missed him. She was a ways to the right of where the weasel had fallen, and moving

aggressively toward Joe's hiding spot. Dashing out the other side, he saw her flash behind the trunk of an oak tree, and she managed to zing another shot at him as she did it.

Her identity had become apparent; this was no Goth fashion model but an aggressive killer. She would have shot him right on the street by the warehouse, regardless of the cops, if he'd given her the chance. Who the olive-skinned weasel was and why she wanted him dead was a big question mark in Joe's mind.

He heard a rustle in the bushes. She was moving closer. He was willing to bet she'd seen his Colt, which was no match for her superior weapon. She probably took his hit on the weasel as a lucky shot and was moving in for the kill. She was right, too. A fast automatic with a trained killer behind it was more than a match for Joe with a 6-shot Colt. He couldn't afford to wait for her to suddenly appear and pull the trigger, and he couldn't hear her movements either. He prepared to make a fast move closer to the building and another tree. Loud shots rang out; the sound of sirens filled the air. Joe looked right and saw Brodie, wounded and bleeding, coming around the side of the building. The spook came behind him. They'd seen the woman, and Brodie had fired at her and missed. Joe heard the pop of a suppressor and saw a bullet catch Brodie in his other leg.

Rushing out from cover, Joe saw the woman, and she wasn't shooting but running away. He fired a shot and missed, then watched as she disappeared around the back of the Bulldog building. Another star sprinter, another situation he simply couldn't read. He didn't know what was going on, and he didn't bother to think about it. He forgot about the woman and ran to Brodie. He knew the woman wasn't alone. She had a driver waiting behind the building, and unless the police sealed off the area fast, she would get away.

Cops and firefighters suddenly arrived on the scene in full force, but it was too late. The chaos allowed the woman to escape. Out front, the van had exploded and burned. There wasn't a fire in the Bulldog lobby, just wisps of remaining smoke and chaos. Sterling Brodie became the focus of ambulance attendants, who provided him with more medical care than he needed. He'd been winged twice and had flesh scorched off his legs, but he wouldn't die or end up crippled. Officer Keller was in charge of the entire emergency scene, including the heavily armed task force that arrived. He had been empowered by the police chief, and that seemed a step up from his earlier investigation of a back-alley shooting.

Two hours later, Joe sat in the same interrogation room as before. Resembling a form of jail cell, for most people, it would be the prelude to long-term confinement. This session had Keller leading the investigation, but not in a very professional manner. The area outside the observation window didn't have a bench full of criminals this time, but Special Agent Jason Kufner was there, standing with his arms crossed, staring inside. Velisa Newport was a no-show but was probably trying to get authorization to interfere. A dispute had developed between the spooks and the police, mainly because the cops were certain something big was going on that they couldn't act on because they were being left out of the loop.

Keller, wearing the toughest face he could muster without forcing his auburn hair to thin further, wasn't exactly going by evidence law. He had the pieces of Joe's disguise, including his coat, spread on the table beside the Colt for this second phase of the interview.

Keller spoke softly to enhance the effect of his words. "I'm done shouting. I want you to look at the items we've put on the table. We have a disguise, a gun. We also have a dead man that you shot. We have one, likely more suspects at large. You are so far up Shit Creek you will never paddle free. So, I am asking you once again. Who are those people and why do they want Stirling Brodie, and probably you, dead?"

Joe answered with his own quiet voice. "Do you see that man staring in the window? Agent Kufner is his name. He is the person you should ask, because he is the person who knows what is happening. You might also ask Brodie. The hit man followed him. All I was trying to do was get about town without being followed every step I take, by both the police, the spooks, and whoever those people are."

Keller exhaled, obviously frustrated. "Stirling is knocked out by pain pills, but he was clear enough of mind to state that he doesn't know why those people tried to shoot him. I mean, beyond the fact that they may want to shut down his investigation. Agent Woods, the fed who went inside the building looking for you, alerted Brodie by yelling to him from over by the elevators. Otherwise, he would have been shot in the back. It was close, and the man took shots at both Brodie and Woods, but did not try to target anyone else. Brodie threw himself behind the concierge desk, and once it turned into a shootout, the hit man went behind a pillar, tossed the flash and smoke device, and aborted."

Joe grinned. "I remember that concierge desk. Built like a fortification. It served its purpose today. The fed, Woods; he would have been armed. He should have just shot that guy instead of yelling."

"He didn't expect anything to happen at Bulldog, so he wasn't prepared. He was just trying to follow you."

"I saw Brodie marching in after me. Why was that?"

"He felt you were leading us and the feds around for some entertainment and decided to hold you in custody."

"I think you are looking for something deep and missing the obvious. Your department and federal agents are following me on the idea that I might know something. It has to do with terrorism because Agent Kufner said it did when they first interviewed me. Someone, or more likely some people, want to kill all of us because they want to shut down any investigations into them. They targeted me from the beginning, but I didn't have any ongoing investigation into anyone at the time. So I don't know why they are after me. At least not yet. That hit man probably went for Brodie because he was the first available target. Brodie's investigation poses a threat to them, so they decided to kill him. Unfortunately, for the killer, he wasn't as professional as he thought and lost out to circumstances. The woman who wanted to shut him down and ice me would have had a driver because she got away. Jason Kufner and Newport definitely have

intelligence agency information they aren't releasing. They are simply behaving like feds. They want information to come up the pipe, and they don't send any down."

"Information isn't the only thing they aren't releasing. They ordered us to hold you in custody."

"Okay. So put me in a cell."

"Do you want protective custody? I can get the forms."

"No. I don't want it."

"Then we're releasing you."

"Why?"

"You got lucky and impressed the mayor by killing a terrorist."

"We don't know for sure he was a terrorist. His profile is more like a hit man."

"I know. We also are not doing any favors for Kufner or Newport. They can't prove terrorism, so it remains our investigation. We have ways of uncovering things without answers from you or the feds. My first hope was camera surveillance, but the woman never entered the building, and they didn't have cameras on the park side or at the rear. Sterling Brodie has altered his assessment of you. But don't get the idea that he doesn't think you are involved. He has a gut feeling that you aren't tied to the criminals in the sense of being involved in whatever crimes they plan to execute. His opinion differs from mine in that I say your disguise and gun mean you should be charged. You still may be charged, so don't plan to leave town. As far as Newport and Kufner go, if they want any further help from us, they have to share information and aid our investigation."

Joe felt some relief breaking as Keller spoke and more when a glance outside the observation window showed Kufner unfolding his arms and putting a phone to his ear. As Keller finished speaking, Kufner walked out of the building, slamming the door behind him.

"Looks like Kufner read your lips," Joe said.

"I'm certain he did, if he doesn't already have a bug planted in the room."

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Chapter Four: The Factory

Andras kicked the left front tire of his pickup and squatted for a closer look. The vehicle had a slight pull to the left, but other than being caked with mud, the tire looked fine. Andras' attachment to old rattletraps – he owned three of them – was not shared by others. Neither could they understand a man with psychopathic tendencies toward humanity and a love for inanimate junk. Standing, he turned and took in a postcard view that looked very much like something from industrial Britain in the 1800s.

Under a low leaden sky, the abandoned factory loomed as one of history's grim and mostly forgotten memories. Four tarnished smokestacks spread across the roof of the

place seemed to have exhaled the angry formation of clouds. Most of the brick facing had crumbled or been removed, leaving unsightly walls of stained concrete. Almost two-thirds of the front wall had been removed so that one could see the corroded interior and the base of the stacks on the third floor. Some form of lichens or moss grew on the exterior walls of the intact portion, and it was windowless except for a rectangular strip of windows running across the top floor. That strip of windows, tacked over with opaque plastic, fronted the guest suites, or terrorist suites, as Andras had moved Randy and Ali plus some equipment into these luxury digs.

Andras could only guess at the building's original use. Johan had mentioned that its final years had been spent as a storage area for raw materials for a pet food manufacturer, and there were still piles of large, rusty, empty drums in one section, labeled with such appetizing names as beef blood and slaughter sweepings. It might even have been a slaughterhouse originally, as the incinerator stacks suggested. If so, the collapsed grain silo indicated they had stored grain and low-grade meat in the same place. Andras figured a place that big could fuel a thousand pet food stores or three thousand burger stands. But even the dogs wouldn't eat the food if they could smell the odor wafting from the place now. An old musty reek that would come up your nose, like something dead and unseen was nearby. A tinge of stale sweat remained when the wind blew the reek away. Andras could taste it on the tip of his tongue. To him, it was the misery of the workers who had toiled and died, and animals that had been killed. He cared little for it or them. His preference was the fragrance of the junkyard, old oils, rust, and metals ... all things not human or living.

"Yo!" Lena hollered from the passenger-side window. "You plan on driving in or doing a magazine photo shoot of this dump?"

Andras said nothing in reply, but he felt the place was picture perfect, and safe. Johan claimed the police didn't even patrol it anymore, not since a scandal broke about cops bringing suspects to the location for beatings. The big cyclone fence now constructed around the grounds featured three top rows of barbed wire and meant further isolation that would last at least another three months, because legal issues were causing a delay in the demolition. Andras' big job would be complete long before then, but returning to watch the old dump be blown to smithereens seemed a fine idea. It was certain to release a tremendous dust ghost and blight the landscape one last time. In his mind, there was something grand about explosions. Ali had said his greatest enjoyment was in massacring unbelievers with an AK-47. He loved the screaming of the wounded. He had no class. It was one reason why people like Ali were perfect for suicide missions. They had no leadership skills or subtlety. A death rage that killed and brought about self-destruction was the sum total of their creativity. A powerful explosion, the soft sheeple of society releasing last gasps as they were mercilessly crushed in a collapse would be much more appealing. The true terrorist could walk away fully satisfied while fools like Ali died on the job.

He got back in the truck and then ripped up gravel. The track changed to ruts in hard, clay-colored earth as he drove around back, and then to tall, dead weeds as he pulled up to the factory. He went through a collapsed section of the wall to park inside. It was so dark he had to keep the headlights on. They illumined a cleaner, but gutted section of the factory that had once been offices, and the arrival of the truck caused a couple of

ceiling tiles and dust to fall. This place had been derelict so long that the ceiling tiles had withered and curled, but the glue that had originally tacked them was so strong it still held most of them partially in place. The walls and flooring had been stripped out, leaving a bare concrete floor leading to four square posts in front of another concrete wall. The posts and wall were covered with graffiti, but there were no squatters in the complex now as they'd been evicted by Andras and his terrorists.

Lena tossed Andras the flashlight from the glove compartment. It was a model that suited him, a version of the old security-guard style with a metal handle and grip that could be used as a club without damaging the light. Andras had already tested it, clubbing a squatter into unconsciousness.

They both got out, and Lena moved into the darkness, then turned when she saw Andras going the other way. She followed him across the concrete floor toward the light streaming in through a broken door, and when they reached it, he clicked the flashlight off. They stepped into an open area in the section with no front walls remaining. The concrete flooring in this part had decayed and was covered with wood and paint chips. Old pillars with peeling paint supported a ceiling covered with metal fixtures, long denuded of whatever they had supported.

"Jeeze, it stinks in this place," Lena said as she kicked up some dust.

"Yeah," Andras said. "Like Godzilla is dead and under the floor."

"So why are we here?"

"Just making sure they cleaned up and that no squatters returned."

"Believe me, they would never return after what you did to them."

"See over there in the weeds, the fire pit. Jalal cleaned up and burned all of their stinking garbage."

"Yeah, he should have had the fire in here and burned it in a few of the metal drums so the smoke would remove some of the stink."

"No chance," Andras said. "A few drifting ashes might set the whole place on fire."

"Hey!" Jalal yelled from the darkness of the doorway. "We are upstairs, remember?"

"I remember," Andras said as he walked over. "Just checking things out. I don't want squatters around."

They walked into the darkness. Jalal switched on his light as they crossed the concrete floor, headed for the staircase. Their feet were clanging on the steps up when Jalal replied. "Our pal Johan came through again. We couldn't quite figure out what to do with the squatters. Too many to kill and bury, so he gave us the address of an abandoned house thirty kilometers out of town. We dumped them there. Shit, even the weird guy you messed up forgot about his broken teeth; he was so happy with the new place."

Andras laughed, and even the darkness didn't hide the sound of spittle flying from his lips. "That one was funny."

Lena wasn't laughing. The staircase rose into the salty light streaming through a window. Her face and hands looked almost like porcelain. They went up the last flight.

“If we hadn’t been distracted with the setup of this place, we wouldn’t have been caught with our pants down. Those fucking squatters wasted our time.”

Jalal emerged from the stairs and led them through a doorway to an open area on the upper floor. Like the rest of the building, the interior walls had been taken out, leaving two large areas. Light streamed in through four windows in this section. Opaque plastic had been tacked over them, creating a ghostly effect. There were only wooden rafters in here, but they were clean. The floor was solid, unfinished oak, and had been swept. It showed some undulations from its great age, which was why it hadn’t been stripped like the rest of the building. Some used furniture, including a huge wooden table they used to go over plans, was situated near the center of the room. A trunk with rolls of detailed maps that Andras had drawn sat next to the table. His style was more like that of an old sea captain. Modern people do everything on electronic devices like tablets, laptops, and phones. Andras knew there were risks no matter how one operated, but he did not want to be busted because of electronic files. Security spiders scoured the cloud; security-agency Trojans and worms invaded computers, no matter how secure. It got even worse when all the corporate actors with adware and AI that intruded into personal files were taken into account. The information they gathered could be quickly passed off to the authorities as tips. Andras trusted very few people because experience said it was so, and they were here today for that very reason. A betrayal had occurred.

A generator hummed on the floor beneath, and they could feel the vibrations in their feet. It powered a few light banks and the living quarters in the second enclosed part of this floor. They could have easily connected the place to the power grid, using legal or illegal methods, but didn’t do it because police often looked for power usage in places where there shouldn’t be any.

Andras looked about and frowned. “The supplies. Jalal, I told you to put the crates here.”

Jalal cleared his throat and muttered. “I’m still trying to get used to not being called Jay,” he said as he tried to figure out what to say. Nothing spectacular came to mind, so he told the truth. “We had a few things we needed. Johan has the truck. He’s picking them up.”

Andras rolled his eyes. “Exactly where is he?”

“Well, ’er, a place where he can get everything we need.”

“Which is where exactly?”

“Uh, that would be the Lakeside Mall.”

Andras remained calm. “Who is with him?”

“He’s sort of by himself.”

“Great, that stupid fuck parked a truck full of explosive material at a mall. Has it occurred to you that sometimes trucks get broken into or that sometimes police get suspicious?”

“It has. You see, he was supposed to take the van, but he drove off in the truck. I didn’t find out until he called a few minutes ago.”

“Called about what?”

“Everything’s fine. He just wanted to let me know he got a parking ticket, wants to know if we will pay it.”

“Motherfucker!” Andras shouted. He slammed his hand on the table.

“It’s okay; he’ll be here in fifteen minutes.”

Lena stepped between them. “He’ll be back. My concern is our guest. Where is he, and what did they get out of him? Like, what is his name, and who sent him?”

“That I have well in hand,” Jalal said. “Randy says his name is Abdul Maalik something or the other. Translates into English as slave of the master, Allah.”

“Fuck the master, Allah. Who sent him? Why did he send his partner in to try to ice a cop?”

Jalal again cleared his throat. “He intended to kill everyone. Us and them.”

Andras’ eyes popped, but his expression remained stern. “Go on.”

Jalal knew when Andras’ temper was about to flare, so he worked to calm him quickly. “It all works in our favor. There was an Islamic insurrection overseas, led by a Syrian faction. Our contact informs us that it was put down, and some spies were executed. What this means is our inside men are now firmly in control of the organization. Think about it for a moment. We have Satanist control of the world’s largest Islamic terror network. But even with three men inside the leadership, we still have to prove our skills here. A successful execution of this operation will see us fully accepted, even by skeptics. Randy and Ali, plus the new people on the way, will go on to martyrdom, mass death will hit the news, and we will be the management controlling terrorist operations in the West.”

Andras didn’t answer, being suddenly lost in thought. Lena remained sharp and unimpressed. “Firm control isn’t giving the police a dead body to work with or causing their investigation to grow.”

“We might face a delay of a few days so that things can cool down some. Those two men are loose ends. The rogue faction knew about our operation and sent them here before being put down. They were told to kill the investigating police, that private detective guy, and us. They were then to direct Randy and Ali on a new mission, which they would control. One with politicians as targets.”

Andras replied with a hot whisper. “How much do Randy and Ali know about this?”

“Exactly what they should know. Nothing more. It appears this Abdul Maalik chap is an old enemy of Ali’s. The two are originally from rival terror networks, and they’ve come to blows in the past. They totally understand that the two were part of an insurrection. It is not an unusual practice among Islamic terrorists. Randy and Ali have learned nothing about the real situation. I mean about us and our hidden hand control of the parent organization.”

Andras nodded but was obviously not convinced. "I need this operation completed. I nearly killed those two fools two days ago when they went after Lena. The longer they are around, the more the danger that I will lose control."

Lena snorted. "It isn't you, but me who will lose control and kill them."

"No worries, Andras," Jalal said. "They believe that Lena converted yesterday. I told them I took her to a mosque and that she has now accepted Islam. She just hasn't learned to practice it yet."

Displeasure showed on Lena's face. "I don't plan on practicing wearing a sack and walking behind men."

"I figured as much," Jalal said. "The difference is if they think you're not one of them, under their interpretation of Islam, they can do anything, use you as a sex slave, behead you ... all with Allah's approval. Now that they believe you have embraced Islam, and you haven't made the mistake of marrying one of them, they are obligated to keep their distance."

"Fuck this Islam shit," Andras blurted. "If everyone has their own interpretation of it, it isn't anything. Where do they have that assassin? Take me to him!"

"Sure," Jalal said. "Follow me." He led the way to a second stairwell on the other side and clicked on his light as he entered. It was so dark, Andras turned on his light as well. Hollow footsteps echoed as they descended. They reached the first floor, went deeper to the first basement level, and then to the second basement. The stairwell opened on an old, battered set of swing doors. Tar had been splattered on them and on parts of the floor at some point in the past. Just beyond them, the floor was strewn with old, yellowed paper and a few overturned file cabinets. Rusted wire mesh separated some areas, and beyond it, another door, hanging on its hinges, opened onto another section. The next door was heavy, like the door to a freezer or a meat locker. As they entered, the bad odor intensified, and in the room it became nearly unbearable. A repulsive odor, one could almost feel it, even though it had aged for about a century.

They no longer needed flashlights as oil lanterns lit the room and the garish scene. Flickering shadows drifted in the room. Randy and Ali were present as ghastly specters in the orange-tinted light. Ali had turned to face them. He wore no shirt but had on a leather butcher's apron that matched his ghoulish grin. Randy was not facing them. He wore a large white smock over his clothes and had a white scarf tied pirate-style over his hair. The stains on the smock were most certainly blood, but in the light, they looked green, as if maybe they were torturing an alien. The victim, if this particular terrorist could be addressed as such, was strapped to an old rollaway bed of the type emergency vans used. He looked more dead than alive. He'd been stripped to his boxer shorts, and they were soiled with the same green color as Randy's smock. A wall composed of thick, opaque glass cubes rose just behind the rollaway and glowed with reflections of the lanterns.

This man had been the driver, and he had brought the assassin to the scene at the Bulldog building. He was also the backup, in case the first man failed. Their mission had not been a suicide mission but one to shut down an investigation and establish control.

Their masters must have had supreme confidence in them. Overconfidence because they were dead themselves and had failed at both ends.

Jalal addressed Ali. "Anything new from him?"

Rather than answer, Ali just grunted and leered at Lena.

Randy turned; his subject coughed up blood, spat, and tried to rise. His blood spittle hit Randy's smock, but Randy paid him no heed. "This one is tough, but I have the answers. No others came with them. Passports were British, forged, of course. They went straight for the targets and failed."

"Do we have those passports?" Andras said.

"I have them," Lena said.

"Ah, she is a lovely woman. One that kills," Ali said in admiration. "If only I didn't have to die for the jihad, she would make a good third wife. The slave is better, but it is too late for that now that she has been to the mosque."

"You have no taste," Randy replied. "Sexually immoral Western women ... I would kill them all. They never learn the proper Islam."

Rising slightly on his bed, Abdul Maalik groaned and said, "Pigs, filthy pigs. Kill me so I don't have to smell your filthy pig barn anymore. Islam, you know nothing of Islam." He stared Randy in the face. "The Western whore is what you are ... you people can read the Quran in Arabic, but if you prayed fifty times a day, you would still be whores. And you, Ali, you are an apostate dog, no better than a Shiite."

Randy remained motionless, but if eyes could stab a man to death, his would have done so. With him, the offense had struck to the heart, and he was unable to act. Ali did not have that problem. He pulled his apron up and jumped so that he came across the bed, straddling Abdu Maalik. He planned to either strangle him or beat him, but the wheels of the bed rolled and slipped on some of the blood on the floor, causing them both to tumble. The prisoner screamed as Ali overturned the bed completely and then put crushing weight on it. During this action, Randy came to life and walked slowly to a scarred wooden bench stacked with their instruments of torture. He picked up the largest weapon and then addressed Ali in his fiercest voice. "Stop beating him, turn that bed over, and get him ready. The time has come for the holy decapitation."

Andras, Jalal, and Lena had been gaping, mostly dumbstruck through this scene. The sight of the sword brought fear into Jalal's eyes. He tapped Andras on the shoulder. "I would rather not watch this. Let's go."

Andras nodded, noticed Lena wasn't turning to leave, and took her arm, leading her away as he followed Jalal. The sick moans of the suffering terrorist trailed them and grew more ghastly and ghostly as they went up to the top. They passed the truck and went back to the open section. Once in the light, Jalal offered Andras and Lena American cigarettes, and all three of them lit up.

Lena spoke first. "That Abdul Maalik jerk had one thing right. The reek down there was the worst form of torture going. Jeeze, what a fucking pig sty."

“I was on a pig farm once,” Jalal said. “We killed an informer after throwing him in with the hogs. Pigs actually smell fresher than that unholy essence down there.”

Andras grinned. “Ali and Randy don’t exactly pass the smell test either. Lena. I didn’t know you enjoyed decapitations. I saw you hesitating down there like you wanted to see the show.”

“I saw a beheading in Saudi Arabia,” Jalal said. “Beheading makes a boring spectacle. I’d much rather see a firing squad in action.”

“It wasn’t the beheading that held me there,” Lena said. “I was just interested in how those two ridiculous murdering dogs would do it. Some of it was a secret hope that they would make a mistake and kill each other.”

“You aren’t the only one with that not-so-secret wish,” Jalal said. “But they’ll be dead soon enough, and if they display busts in the terrorist hall of glory, their mugs will be there. For now, they are completely clean. Our inside government contact has dressed up the paperwork with our contact abroad. We even had some help from Johan. Right now, the cops could pull them over, security agencies could check them, and their files would come up clean.”

“Some things are working right on this caper,” Andras said, his voice full of approval. “Those clean records are certainly needed if they are traveling with Johan. The fool already got ticketed. Good thing they found no reason to search the truck.”

Lena exhaled. She was about to add a few words, but Andras’ words worked like magic and conjured up the rumble of a truck arriving. They turned and saw Johan returning, taking the truck through the ruts to its hiding spot around back.

Andras dropped his cigarette and carefully put it out with his boot. He looked to Jalal. “Johan will come with us. He can use your car. I don’t want him to see the mess they’re making down there. After those saps take a few prayer breaks, oversee the unloading and checking of the supplies, we’re going to move ahead with the next phase. The way I figure it, the forces of law and order are expecting possible armed terror attacks like the one those fools put into action at Bulldog. We only have to get to the target building and get inside to rig it for demolition, and we’ve got Johan’s company as a cover.”

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The rain fell with a steady beat on the canvas awning out front of Joe’s building. He’d already taken a walk around the area and knew no one was tailing him today. So far, no killers, no cops, no federal agents were about, and it seemed too good to be true. He watched people hurry past on the rainy street, emotions dampened, umbrellas up, faces as formless as the mist. The wind blew the fragrance of marijuana across the road, and he could see two men smoking and chatting in the alley next to the gym. They were locals, not cops, and wearing coats that were the current feature in the front window of the surplus store two blocks down. Satisfied, Joe turned and was about to walk until he could flag a cab, but he didn’t get two steps before muttering, “Oh shit!” and halting. A car had swung over. It was parked right next to the fire-route sign by the alleyway. The unshaven face behind the windshield looked familiar; it was agent Jason Kufner, and he

looked as rough as the vehicle he was driving. The vehicle was a 1970 Chevelle still under the process of refurbishment; parts of the body were not textured, though the two distinct racing stripes were on the hood. As Kufner got out, the rain stopped, and Joe couldn't decide if that was a good or bad omen.

Kufner stepped up to Joe, and his face was calm though stony. On their first meeting, he'd been wearing a suit and had the look of a Secret Service Agent. This time around, his hair was mussed, and his whisker shadow had deepened; he was in plain street clothes – jeans, a sweater, and a solid-color light-blue shirt.

“You aiming for some car chases, driving a beast like that?”

“Hey, it's a classic car, but it isn't mine. A friend lent it to me. I'll be in town for a while.”

“It never occurred to me that you might leave.”

“I heard that you can't leave town.”

“That's local cop protocol, but it isn't very effective when it comes to keeping track of people. Half the people on their wanted list are still in town, hiding in plain sight.”

“That is because they don't work with us. Just facial recognition alone gets us to most people fast. I nailed a guy last week because he wasn't smart enough to tape over the web camera on the stolen laptop he was using.”

“So what exactly is it you want from me?”

“Nothing. I'm just letting you know that the man you shot has been traced to weird terrorist stuff happening abroad. It involves a number of corpses. The focus of our investigation has moved to the international level. I'm cleaning up some things here. We aren't investing any more time following you.”

“Nice to know. But it doesn't get the local cops off me. I might not be on the street long if they decide to press charges.”

“They won't press charges. We own part of the investigation, and our stuff is classified. They can't take it into court, and they are pissed about that. They'll just forget the gun and disguise charges on you. Terrorists don't exactly have equal rights anymore. It's a duck shoot on them. Nobody cares who scored the hit. They can't prosecute because no judge or jury would convict you even if we allowed some of our evidence in open court.”

“So what is the real message you are delivering?”

“The message is stay out of our hair. We can arrest and jail without charges. If you're on the street, take some dirty divorce cases. Don't fish into this or you'll be hanged. You had better watch out for the police, too. At any time, they might decide to get something on you and bury you.”

“I've already figured that out. I'm working, but it is some shoe-leather stuff that is tame. International terrorists are out of my league. I can't do it anyway. The tracking resources your agency has are tuned to take out terrorists. Your usual private investigator would get nowhere on that type of investigation and would probably be sliced and diced before he turned up something.”

“Glad you finally learned that.”

Jason Kufner got back in his car and revved the engine. Joe watched as the powerful beast roared out into traffic. He believed Kufner and that the case had gone international, but knew some of it was still here, or Kufner wouldn't have stopped by. His feeling was that Kufner was probably doing some cleanup work, some dirty work, and he didn't want any nosy Joes stumbling onto it. Intelligence agencies were always playing games with terrorist groups. Getting inside them, using them, and creating intrigue to the point where no one could tell the good guys from the bad guys. Kufner might even hang himself someday.

Joe thought about it a little more, the rain started up, and he flagged a cab. It began to pour as he got in, and he decided that Kufner's visit was a bad omen and that he should stay away from that particular investigation. He had other work anyway, and the cab became his mobile office as the rain fell in biblical proportions. The deluge caused a traffic jam, so he took out info on the current case. The files were paper, and he had them in a waterproof envelope in a large pocket stitched inside his coat. He went through the two thin folders. A courier had sent them earlier from the Cusac Demolition Company. Specifically from Gerard Cusac, the company president, a man Joe had met once at a cocktail party. Since that time, he had done background checks on potential employees. Joe didn't know much about Cusac Demolitions except that it was larger and more prosperous than the small name would imply. Going through the files on the two men, Joe thought things over carefully. A full check meant time spent waiting for replies, even though the CEO wanted an immediate report. Joe would have to use his best judgment.

The cab pulled over, and again the rain came to an ominous halt. Water raced down the gutters from the deluge and spilled over his shoes as he reached the entrance. Cusac Demolitions' corporate headquarters would have fit nicely in the blocks around Joe's office. The design fit the category of an old industrial office, being six stories tall and featuring a mix of red and yellow brick, with an ornamented stone railing around the entire roof. The company was 50 years old according to the date on the bronze. The entry he walked through would have been called stately in earlier times. There was no security desk at the main entrance, only a directory, which didn't list the office of the company president, but Joe knew it was on the second floor.

He walked across a floor of polished white marble with a pattern of gray rectangles and up the stairs. The second floor featured arched decorative interior windows, each eight feet tall, with safety glass nearly touching the floor, allowing a view of the entry and hallway below. Since only the president was located on the second floor, his offices were sure to be spacious. Joe found a waiting room at the first set of doors, went in, and sat with four other men who looked like sales types. The reception desk was empty, but an attractive blond secretary appeared a minute later, and he stepped up to the counter.

Her eyes filled with recognition when he gave the name Joe Holiday, but he wasn't sure what brand of recognition it was. Feline eyes, a nice figure, and perfume, but she never let her professional appearance slip. She was of the career woman type, he was certain. She would recognize his name, as it was often listed on confidential files of new employees.

He mentioned his appointment with the President, and she flashed a quick, conspiratorial look from her eyes as she said, "Follow me."

She opened a waist-high swing gate and led him past a series of office cubicles and out another door. Joe found her an excellent person to follow. She wore an olive, full-skirted, long-sleeved dress that accentuated her figure and showed some leg. It was business attire he found much more stimulating than most office dress. Her hair was full and flounced as she walked. They went out a frosted glass door and into another section of the hallway.

Joe moved abreast of her. "Those other gentlemen didn't look pleased. They didn't expect me to be served first."

"Oh, them. Salesmen. They won't be seeing Mr. Cusac. The screening area is there for that purpose, to keep them away from the boss."

"I see. I'm surprised he called me in. My reports used to be screened through his personnel director."

"Our personnel director hasn't been in much lately. That is probably why."

They arrived at another frosted glass door. She pressed a silent buzzer, then opened the door and held it for Joe to enter. She didn't follow. The room looked more like a library than an office. It had stacks to Joe's left and right, and an aisle leading to Cusac's huge mahogany desk. Gerard Cusac wasn't at the desk; he was off to the right of it, looking out a broad arched window at the rainy street below. He turned when he saw Joe, walked up, and shook his hand. Cusac was tall, strong, of a medium build, and at least sixty-five. He had dense eyebrows, and his eyes had a near-sighted look that was probably just an illusion. His hair was gray, in need of a trim, and peppered with a bit of black.

"Nice to see you again, Joe. I hear you've been in the news again."

"Yes. It's always nice to see someone who heard it but didn't see it."

"Good point. The news is all nonsense these days. I don't keep up with it. This is my retirement home. A working retirement, in my office here with the old files."

"It surprised me; I thought everything would be electronic."

"It is. I kept these old file books from the company's first twenty years in business. I have the computer stuff built right into my desk, but I prefer the atmosphere of yesterday."

Cusac sat at his desk, and Joe took the guest chair in front of it. Sensing it was time for business, Joe took out the two files and leafed through them.

"What's your feeling on those two men?" Cusac asked.

"I usually go by facts, not feelings. A couple of overseas replies haven't come in yet, but they come up clean."

"You're certain of it?"

"Yes, but since you brought up feelings, my gut feeling doesn't align with the facts. The reason is they come up too clean, almost like they have been washed clean. Though I

don't know how anyone would do it without powerful connections. The identities register as genuine, but foreign nationals, when thoroughly vetted, always have some warts. These guys don't have so much as a pimple. They've been cleared without blemish by your personnel director, Johan Dietrich, as well. Now, there is something about the background nations I should mention. There is systemic bribery, and bad records can be erased or altered. Usually, that would mean they had some things cleaned up, but not every single thing."

"I farm out many jobs. We have many employees, and we've used many contractors. They always have blemishes. There isn't anyone in demolition and construction who isn't blemished. It's just a matter of whether they are the right blemishes or acceptable blemishes. And that is really for every job, even if no explosives are used. The wrong men gaining access to explosives could finish us."

"Exactly. Side by side, these photos look like two mug shots. Neither of the photos is current; both are at least five years old and of poor quality. The visible scar on the first man's neck looks like someone once tried to cut his head off. The other guy looks like the leader of a biker gang. The strange skill sets listed aren't much related to demolition. What are they hired to do?"

"A complex job. We have a contract to move a graveyard. We get many unusual contracts. We don't just blow up and knock down. This may surprise you, but moving a graveyard is a big job, and no one wants to do it."

"Grave diggers, they certainly do look like that."

Cusac laughed. "My problem is they've been everywhere but the graveyard, driving around with my personnel director and supervising jobs they aren't hired for ... everything from moving supplies and demolition equipment to inspecting job sites. I wouldn't know about it if they hadn't made waves and gotten into disputes with other employees. They also made the news. My secretary brought me a video clip of the two of them, with my personnel director in the middle, from that recent anti-Pride Starbucks melee. You know, those odd religious protesters who sometimes appear in town. Johan being there upsets me most. I don't want my company name tied to controversial issues that could kill off business."

"I see. It doesn't add up at all. Men without blemish rolling about town like loose cannons. The personnel director being with them and involved seems ridiculous. So why would he be there? You could just fire all of them."

"Johan has been with the company a long time. There may be more to this. If so, I want to know what it is. Something is not right, and I want the details."

"What do you suggest?"

"You follow them. Do a covert investigation. I'll pay your fee weekly. When your investigation is done, report to me. Report earlier if something immediate and serious is found."

"Sure, I can do that. It should be easy work. If they are up to something, we'll find out. Can you share some information about this Johan fellow with me? I know very little about him and mostly send him reports or talk to him on the phone."

“Stop by to see my secretary on the way out. That’s Kelly, the woman who brought you here. I’ll notify her now. I want you to do more than just follow them. If they cause any trouble, bury it before the company name gets in the news.”

Joe strolled down the empty hallway and returned to the reception area. There were two men remaining. They were fidgeting with impatience and didn’t like seeing the pretty secretary wave Joe over the moment he stepped in the door. This time, she took Joe inside her private office and gave him a flirtatious glance as she sat at the desk.

“What information do you need, exactly?” she said.

“Basic stuff. Your home phone number for starters.”

She blushed.

“Okay, just kidding. I need his home address and his vehicle and plate number. Do you know where he is today? That would help.”

“Oh, I know where he is. The complaints come in wherever he goes with those men. Now, if you plan to interview him, be warned, the man has a temper. He can be very rude and bullying.”

“I’ve handled rude men before, but I don’t plan on interviewing him. It is very important that no one knows I’m checking up on him. That means others in this company or anyone who comes here asking questions. No gossip.”

“I can do that,” she said. She called Cusac and said a few hushed words. She then hung up, opened a desk drawer, and took out a plastic ID case. She typed a few words, then hit a button. A card popped out of one of the slots in the office printer. She slipped it into the case. “The print is a temporary ID card, and the magnetic card backing it is an access card. Most of our sites are gated, and there will be a scanner in the lock panel. It is barely noticeable, a black square. It will read the front of the card as you pass it over, then read the back, and it will unlock for 5 seconds and lock when you close it. I’ll print out Johan’s home address, vehicle type, and plate number for you. He was last seen at the Liberty Import Complex. If you find him there, you won’t need a card. That place is still in business; they don’t have to be out for a couple of months. We will be demolishing it and have to plan long in advance, but why Johan would be there now is something we don’t know.”

“I know that building, and I had no idea they were demolishing it.” Joe passed her his business card. “Call me if anything pressing comes up. I won’t be dropping off any reports. Mr. Cusac will get verbal reports if necessary. If it is just simple info, I will call it in to you.”

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An hour went by, and Joe stood in the small parking lot beside KillShot Security. He’d talked Sanderson into lending him one of the Cygni Innovations vans, and he was tossing a backpack into the rear of it.

Tall and thin, Sanderson was a chain-smoker with a butterfly tremor in the stained right hand he used to smoke. Being somewhat paranoid, he was an odd person to be

running a security company, though paranoia did have its advantages in an industry where one couldn't afford to be caught off guard. Nodding in needless approval, he said, "It's reassuring to see you working without equipment."

Joe turned away from the van. "How's that?"

"I mean, I'm glad you are staying away from that federal case."

"My duffel bag of disguises and items is my usual equipment. I've never been James Bond. I have to follow a guy. He's been traveling with a couple of suspicious characters, so seeing what they are doing and where they are going is the method. The feds would probably tap his phone, which gets you nowhere when he's with the two suspects, not talking to them on the phone."

"Any idea what you might uncover?"

"I suspect illegal activity. It could be anything. Selling drugs, storing them at company locations. Maybe some form of theft ring. Maybe they plan to steal explosives. It is a demolition company. I'll have to drop it if it has something to do with explosives, because that is federal. If I show up with such a case ongoing, they will bring the hammer down on me. They'll be sure I knew about it all along and didn't notify them. There is a good chance that they are just three idiots and nothing more, so I have no worries yet."

Sanderson had been listening carefully. It was one of his steadier moments. He flicked a long ash from his cigarette. "Look out for yourself. There are three of them, and they just might be deadly."

"I have a gun, if needed."

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Chapter Five: Surveillance

The day was warm and gray, but the burnt orange of autumn leaves flying in the wind gave it color. Kelly had already called, saying she didn't know Johan's whereabouts, so Joe took the first option and drove to his suburban house. The house was on a street running parallel to the freeway, but a tall wall isolated the neighborhood from the worst effects of the traffic. Joe parked at the end of the dead-end street where a concrete stairway went up to the cross street. He hadn't noticed any traffic at Johan's place on the pass-by, but his large SUV sat in the driveway, so he was probably inside.

Joe strolled slowly up to the house, thinking it the sort of house most city people would want to own but couldn't afford. It had a landscaped front yard. The house itself featured brick detailing and white aluminum siding. It was large with one long sloped roof. Other than the wind, the crunch of gravel, and the filtered rush of the freeway on the other side of the wall, there was no activity. No interior lights were on as he passed by. Perhaps Johan was there but sleeping. Entry would be easy, as there was no alarm system, but he didn't want to start his investigation with an illegal entry that could tip the suspect off if the suspect was home. He decided to wait in the truck. There was no rush.

He'd left his phone in the truck cab and found a text message that had just arrived from Kelly. The brief text noted that Johan had, for some unexplained reason, checked out a box truck. It belonged to the demolition company, but for security reasons, it was plain white with no logo or markings. He'd had it for a couple of days. No questions had been asked because the truck was empty. Records would have to be kept if he put anything in it at any job site. The text listed the plate number.

The house looked to be a dead end, like the street. Driving around looking for a truck by its plate number would be a waste of time. He was about to drive away, then he shut off the engine. Peeking inside the house would be a better option. He didn't want to go in looking like Joe Holiday, and a car coming up the street and parking two houses away from Johan's place confirmed that idea. He watched an elderly lady and her small pug exit the car and enter the house, then went around the back of the truck, opened the door, and got inside.

He pulled a fast disguise out of his duffel bag and arranged the pieces. It was a look he called white-trash Elvis, though it wasn't really much like Elvis. The long blonde comb-back was the wig style, and the blond shade had an orange tint to imitate a poor dye job. There were dark glasses to go with it, a pair of leopard-print pants, and a tacky graffiti jacket featuring football team logos. This disguise had worked in the past, and he used various jackets with it. He'd seen the police reports after a rumble and tumble with some heavies during a case. The fantastic look led to fantastic descriptions of a weird character that weren't much like the disguise.

After carefully adjusting the wig, he got out and strolled up to the house. There were side and front entries, and no signs of surveillance cameras or alarms. He picked the side and found it to be a cheap bolt lock. Using a couple of tools to saw through the pins and turn the lock would take a few minutes, but he didn't have to because the door wasn't locked. In this isolated neighborhood, it probably didn't matter, but Joe never left things to chance, and it told him Johan was careless.

He stepped onto a porch full of trash, mostly empty beer cans, stacked pizza boxes, and takeout containers of all sorts in open bins. Johan's taste in beer, cheap American stuff, made Joe cringe. He preferred quality beer in a chilled bottle. Johan lived alone; his wife had divorced him, and it was easy to see why. The feeling was that he wouldn't find anything in the house. It would reveal itself as a slob's castle. Perhaps the garage would be the place to check, as Johan's vehicle wasn't parked in it but on the asphalt outside. Joe's past investigations told him that garages often yielded pay dirt if there had been suspicious activity, so he stepped out the side door and closed it. At the same time, a neighbor came out of his side door. That door had no windows, so he wouldn't have seen Joe entering the house. For the neighbor's benefit, Joe pretended to push the side buzzer, then knocked on the door saying, "Johan! Anybody home!"

Of course, no one answered. Joe prepared to walk away, but saw the neighbor still watching him. Small, bald, and with a tradesman's look, the neighbor stepped up to the low fence. "Johan's not around. He left with those other two guys hours ago. So what's the story? Is Johan turning his place into a flop house?"

"Go my own place, man," Joe said. "Don't know the other guys. I'm just here to visit Johan. Haven't seen him for a long time."

“Yeah, well, if you’re smart, you won’t see him. Those new workers of his are crazy assholes. Loonies from Saudi Arabia or some place. Johan says they are helping him move a graveyard.”

“Really? I won’t be working on that, brother. Hard work is against my religion. Listen, don’t tell Johan I popped by. I want it to be a surprise when I see him.’

“Sure, no problem.”

“Okay, see ya later.”

Joe strolled back to the truck. He wondered if the graveyard thing was just some form of fraud. It sounded possible. Maybe Johan and his two men were just killing off days, moving stuff around in a truck, screwing the dog, and billing for it. Not an unusual practice. Construction and demolition were fields full of shady operators, but the company president would usually know if they were scamming a client.

Joe was about to leave when the neighbor pulled out in his BMW and drove off the other way. Popping back out, he strolled over to Johan’s house, took a careful look around, and walked up to the garage door. To open it, he used a two-button device. He held the first button for thirty seconds, then a beep indicated it had cracked the code, and he pressed the second button to open the door. The light sensor lit up the garage, so he rolled the door back down, then looked around. It was spacious, with gardening equipment, a lawn mower, and assorted mounted tools and fishing equipment. He looked down and saw white powder spilled all over the floor, with many footprints in it.

Johan had probably left his vehicle outside because this mess hadn’t been cleaned up yet. He spotted a crumpled piece of paper on top of an overturned cardboard bin, strolled over, and picked it up. Written in pencil, it was a crude grocery list that included diatomaceous earth, blasting caps, nitro-glycerine, fuse cables, sodium carbonate, and cardboard cylinders. This note did not sit well with Joe because it was a recipe for homemade dynamite, and one of the ingredients, diatomaceous earth, was all over the floor. Diatomaceous was spelled correctly on the note, indicating that either Johan or someone brighter than the two clowns he was with had written it.

He decided to leave. He took a broom and carefully eliminated his footprints in the dust, and then stepped out and closed the roll-up door. Certain that no one had seen him coming or going, he got back in the van and started it up. Before he could drive away, a truck turned the corner at the far end of the dead-end street. White, a box truck, appeared to have no markings. As it approached, he could tell it was Johan at the wheel. His two new workers did not appear to be with him unless they were in the back of the truck. Joe knew that Johan might want to drive to the end where he was parked to turn the truck. There was only one way out of the cul-de-sac, and he hoped to escape notice. Pulling out, Joe passed him and slowed to a crawl before turning off the street. Johan had stopped and jumped out for a run into the house. It meant he would be leaving shortly, so Joe turned left, found a parking spot, and waited for the white truck to pull out.

He didn’t have to wait long, and Johan proved easy to tail. A road-rage and reckless driver, Johan spent so much time bullying other motorists with the truck and cursing, it was certain he would never have it together enough to notice he was being followed.

Johan cruised into the big outdoor parking lot at the Lakeside Mall, so Joe passed it by, then turned back and parked near the truck. He spotted Johan marching across the parking lot, not toward the main entrance but the Home Depot entrance. Joe strolled over to the box truck, took a walk around it, and peeked in the cab. He noticed a parking ticket sitting on the dashboard.

Joe was sure the other two idiots wouldn't be hiding in the back. The two vertical rear doors had an odd lock with a push-button handle, and since it would be easy to pick, Joe took out a small lockset and worked on it. This lock was irritating; it took him nearly fifteen minutes, and he had to keep breaking away to make sure no one had eyes on him and that Johan wasn't returning. A cold wind kicked up and chilled his fingers, making them stiff. Finally, it opened, and he got inside, finding nothing of interest other than two large, sealed plastic crates.

No interior light came on, so he used his own super-bright penlight, adjusting it for a wide beam. These plastic crates had snap-off lids, so Joe removed one lid and looked inside. The entire crate was neatly packed with sticks of dynamite. These sticks were homemade but nicely fashioned. They looked almost factory-made. Joe knew dynamite was still used in basic demolition. He had heard of it being used in tunneling and excavation, especially breaking rock. It was even possible that Johan was going to use dynamite in his graveyard work, but if so, he would requisition factory-made dynamite. People didn't make their own dynamite because that was definitely illegal. Dynamite needed to be stable, properly stored, and properly transported.

Joe used the light to inspect some sticks closely and noticed something else: a brick of plastic explosive packed in at the side. Since the other crate was identical, Joe assumed it contained more of the same. It caused him to wonder why Johan drove recklessly with explosives in the back. An unfortunate explosion would destroy the truck and a city block with it.

After using a pocket cloth to wipe what he had touched, Joe closed the crate and got out. He remembered the grocery list and wondered where Johan was delivering this contraband. The best way to find out would be to wait and follow Johan. He strolled away and did not see Johan anywhere outside. The mall was a huge building, rounded at the junction of the south and east portions, forming the main entrance. A strip of storefronts ran completely along both sections. Above them, a few hidden floors with no exterior windows formed a giant gray wall topped by advertising signage. Almost nothing could be seen of the interior from the parking lot. The main thing he had to watch was Johan's vehicle, and he could do that from the entrance into Home Depot, so he strolled over and loitered there. There was a bus route that ran through the mall parking lot, and he had to position himself so that the bus wouldn't block his view of Johan's truck.

Nearly half an hour passed; Joe thought about going inside to find him but held back. The interior was one of those multiple open-level designs and was crowded. He'd feel like a sap if Johan emerged from some other part of the mall and drove away while he looked around Home Depot. A few minutes later, Johan exited Home Depot with a big cart of supplies. He was also carrying two heavy bags from other stores.

Joe needed a bite to eat, and his empty stomach produced a sinking feeling tied to his emotions. This investigation had already gone sour, and Johan's purchase of a ton of supplies made it uglier. Johan was up to something very criminal; it was difficult to avoid that conclusion. Reporting it would bring the federal hammer down, so that meant he would alert Gerard Cusac that he was on to something, but not give him any details as to exactly what. He hadn't sized up Johan's accomplices, but if they measured up as similar fools, Joe could attempt to shut this whole thing down quietly. Before doing that, he needed to know what they were using the dynamite for, and that meant a steady tail on Johan.

When Johan got to the truck, he opened the back. Then he turned around and took a couple of steps away from the truck with a startled expression on his face. It was like he'd just discovered that the dynamite was in there. It caused Joe to raise an eyebrow. How could he not know that when he was personally involved in stealing the supplies and fashioning the sticks?

Johan wiped sweat off his brow and then took his time at the truck, carefully packing in supplies and groceries. Items like sleeping bags would cause the average observer to think he was going camping. After bringing the shopping cart back to the rack, Johan strolled toward Joe in the direction of the beer store.

Johan didn't notice Joe as he walked past and stood in the line-up inside. Joe shuffled over, passing a panhandler, and looked through the plate glass. The panhandler muttered curses as Joe stood next to him. As Joe stepped away, the panhandler quickly turned and began to curse at him. "Git the fuck outa here, whitey! This is my turf!"

The panhandler's face was weathered, creased, and nasty. Joe frowned but said, "Don't sweat it. I'm just waiting for a pal to pick me up."

This did not impress the panhandler. He approached, using his stubby finger to jab Joe in the shoulder twice. Joe felt like grabbing the finger and breaking it, but did not do so. He knew that in this case, his disguise was working too well. The panhandler believed him to be street trash and acted accordingly. Down on his luck, black with a leather face and natural nasty expression, he was not the flavor of street person that felt kinship with white-trash Joe. He came on into Joe's face, his breath rank as he said, "This is my beer store, sweet boy. It's time to leave, or it's time to git broken."

Joe took slow steps backward, noting that the man had his fist balled. He would swing as soon as Joe made a reply that could be justly labeled as offensive. Other people in the parking lot were now looking on, and that made it worse. Joe did not want to get into a scuffle that could attract mall cops and allow Johan to drive away while he remained trapped in the piece-of-shit situation.

Joe's intention was to calm the man by offering no fight back, but instead it emboldened him, and he started huffing out his chest, pumping his right fist, and moving forward as Joe stepped back again. Without realizing it, Joe blocked the exit door, and at that moment, Johan emerged carrying a case of 24 cans of cheap beer. Being another hothead, Johan put his hand on Joe's shoulder and eased him aside. When the panhandler didn't move, but remained there with rage on his face, Johan exclaimed, "You dirty fucking loser! Get out of my way, or I'll bust this case of beer over your head!"

That unkind remark ignited the panhandler. He swung at Johan, who dodged deftly aside and nearly knocked Joe over. His case of beer went to the pavement, but the cans didn't burst open. Recovering quickly, Johan blocked the panhandler's punch, then used his weight advantage to force the man back. The panhandler tripped, nearly fell, caught his balance, and stumbled into a soccer mom emerging with a six-pack. Swinging around, the panhandler went for Johan, and they grappled. Joe quickly moved in, helped the woman away, and she left quickly, not wanting anything to do with the scene.

Joe turned back to see Johan prevailing in the scuffle, which was about to end because two mall cops were charging across the parking lot with their batons out. An elbow to the chest from Johan staggered the panhandler, but didn't stop him. He sputtered and was about to attack again, but he didn't get that chance because the first mall cop came in behind him and took him down. Joe again backed away, and Johan threw his hands up in the air in a surrender gesture. The second mall cop arrived and halted, and as Johan wasn't offering a fight, he put his baton away. His partner had the panhandler on the ground, so he knelt down and aided him by slapping on handcuffs.

The angry panhandler was pulled to his feet. He remained spitting mad but unable to control his wheezing enough to speak.

"What seems to be the problem here?" the bigger mall cop asked.

Johan took charge, pointing to Joe with his thumb. "Officer, I came out of the beer store to find this kind gentleman being harassed by this aggressive panhandler. I politely requested that he move aside, and the result was that he uttered a racial slur and assaulted us." Johan turned to Joe as he said this, and he took hold of his arm and pulled him closer.

"That is mostly correct, officer," Joe said. "But we don't want trouble or to press charges, we just want to get on with our business. Perhaps you can issue this man a fine for panhandling."

The security guard nodded; his partner spoke to him, saying, "Sounds about right. We can also put a ban on this man and escort him off the property. Those two can leave."

Since the panhandler wasn't saying anything intelligible, the ruling appeared to be solid. This decision was about to be put into effect when a thin man with wire-rim glasses, longish hair, and the look of a professor stepped forward. "I'm a witness to this scuffle, and I believe you officers are arresting the wrong person." He pointed to Johan. "I witnessed this man assault this poor unfortunate. And that man there," he pointed to Joe, "shouted a racial slur."

The lead mall cop was of mixed race and obviously not tolerant of racism. He clicked his tongue and shook his head as he pasted a phony expression of deep sadness and shock on his face. The professor maintained his look of righteous anger. "Well, well," the cop said. Then he paused as his brain shifted a few gears to measure out the politically correct words he would say next. "The situation has changed. We will have to bring in the police to investigate these allegations."

"Bullshit!" Johan exclaimed, pointing at the professor, which made him cringe. "This fruitcake wasn't even here then. He was over at Starbucks."

"That's right," Joe said. "He couldn't have seen or heard anything; the bus was blocking his view."

Momentarily confused, the lead mall cop looked to the professor. "You do stand by your statement, don't you?" he said, his tone soft and leading.

The professor's eyes drifted to the hostile glare on Johan's face. "I'm not sure. I might be wrong. I thought I saw that."

Recovering his voice, the panhandler exclaimed, "Fuck! Fuck the fat cracker! Fuck all of you!"

"That's it then," the mall cop said. "We break this up. I'm asking you two men to leave the premises. This panhandler will be escorted out by us."

"Suits me," Johan said. He turned to Joe, leaned into him, and spoke quietly with bad breath. "Don't you hate this political correctness? You don't even have to call a spade a spade, and they scream racism."

Joe smiled sheepishly but didn't reply. Johan snapped up his case of beer and walked into the parking lot.

The professor stepped off the curb, narrowly escaped being hit by the approaching bus, and stepped back. Joe grinned at him and walked away without looking back. He saw Johan pacing briskly to the truck. He tossed the beer in the passenger side and went around to the driver's side. Joe hurried to his van and managed to get inside as Johan was driving out.

A vast improvement in Johan's driving indicated that he wasn't taking chances with the dynamite now. Why he hadn't known it was in the truck when he had manufactured it was a mystery. Since he was heading North West, Joe knew he was not returning home. The truck chugged along on congested residential streets, fighting stop-and-go scenarios and the autumn blow. Roehampton Avenue was the last residential street; then Johan turned onto Coehill Road and went through an area of mostly light-industrial units nested within conglomerates. Ravines beyond the buildings on either side of the road isolated the area. The road went around a hillside and onto another road through a rust-belt area of shuttered factories. There were a number of them, nothing much left of some but the foundations, and they were being dug out. Joe kept well back now as even someone as dumb as Johan might tag him. The road dipped into forested cover, the deciduous trees still sported a share of autumn parchment, and that helped. Hanging back, Joe let Johan go uphill toward the end of the trees and a clear area.

Stopping the van, Joe waited, then eased uphill. He pulled off the road behind a copse of trees. Johan was about two football fields ahead, turning into a side road leading up to a factory obviously slated for demolition. It was some form of hybrid beast with four discolored smokestacks and walls of crumbling brick and blemished concrete. Some portions of the wall had been demolished, revealing the interior and the base of the stacks on the third floor. A rectangular strip of windows ran across the top floor in the portion of the factory that had not yet been partially demolished. A tall chain-link fence topped with barbed wire enclosed the factory. It ran through rubble and weeds. Mounds of rubble and debris populated the area around the factory. With open fields around

most of the front fence, Joe couldn't drive up without being noticed, so he went to his duffel bag and got out his Vanguard binoculars.

Johan had stopped and was at the gate. This was a Cusac Demolitions site because Joe could see the name on the Keep Out sign. It brought to mind the idea that Johan might be simply using the dynamite to bring down this site, though it didn't seem logical to use such a crude method when Cusac could use advanced tech to collapse it. Scanning the factory, Joe spotted some steam rising at the top of the intact section. It meant people might be staying inside. He noticed that Johan didn't follow the road once inside but drove over the ruts and around the back. Since Joe's view was at an angle, he only had to run a short distance and get to the top of a knoll to see some of the back. Johan's truck had disappeared, so it had to be parked inside the building. Joe panned over the scene, spotted movement, and held the view. What he saw surprised him so much that he slipped and lost the view.

He zoomed in again. It was the collapsed section, and three people were talking. One of them was smoking. It had been the sight of the woman that led him to slip. This aggressive witch had tailed him and tried to ice him. Her short black hair and Gothic look were unmistakable, and she seemed to blend with the scene of decay. It accented her mysterious quality. She was definitely hard to figure out when it came to her motives and goals. She had to be more than a killer for hire. He scanned the other two, seeing that the first man had an Arab look but was Western and sophisticated. The big man he was addressing had a sinister appearance and carried an air of natural authority, but more like a crime boss's than anything good.

Johan suddenly appeared on the scene, and a conversation began between him and the others, involving much hand-waving and other gestures. This didn't especially please Joe because the feeling was that a bug in the situation, hearing what they were saying, would crack the case for him on the spot. But things were never that easy; he'd have to wait and decide what to do next. And that would depend on whether they remained at the location or left immediately.

They soon broke up and temporarily disappeared from view. It turned out that they left immediately. A pickup came into view, rounding the side of the building, with the boss driving and the scary lady in the passenger seat. Joe waited, and a few seconds later Johan appeared at the wheel of a Buick sedan. The company information hadn't mentioned a Buick, and he didn't have a two-car garage. Johan was alone, which meant the fourth person was still inside the factory. The pickup excited him, but not as much as it could have. It was not the same pickup he'd seen driving off the night of the drone attack, though it was similar. This truck was a GMC, and, if his memory served him right, the other one was an older, cheaper model.

His decision was to follow them, and he almost lost them immediately. They came his way and passed, but they didn't drive straight into the city as he expected. Joe raced into the stretch of the road, dipping through light industrial, expecting to catch up to them, but he didn't spot either vehicle. He turned back and ripped up aging asphalt, then turned sharply onto the only side road running parallel. Clarke Road was a lightly traveled route winding west through the ravines. Johan's sedan appeared ahead, but he couldn't see the pickup. He noted that Johan was not driving recklessly, so it was

probably someone else's car. Johan had a redneck streak that caused Joe to wonder. Mainly about how or why he would be connected to these other characters. More than a few pieces didn't fit in this puzzle.

Twenty minutes later, Joe tailed Johan past an auto junkyard and saw him turn down an industrial road into a huge lot. Joe stopped on the roadside as Johan's vehicle disappeared behind the first building. A huge sign not far off the roadside said Wizard Waste Management in big green letters. Wizard was the name the old security chief at the Beech Brothers Warehouse had given him, so now there was no doubt that Joe's investigation into Johan had taken him down a winding road right back into the case he was not supposed to touch. It was like Johan's unstable dynamite was ready to blow at any moment and take Joe out with the rest of the victims.

Agent Jason Kufner, Velisa Newport; he hadn't seen any sign of them or anyone else with a tail on Johan. Joe knew he had likely stumbled onto a weird lead, so he would be in the clear to continue so long as he was careful. Leaving the van parked on the roadside, he got out, went over, and jumped the fence for a walk around the grounds of Wizard Waste Management.

There were 'No Trespassing' signs all along the perimeter. Joe doubted he would get far before someone questioned him. There were probably on-site security guards. He came to a metal shed with a corrugated roof, surrounded by open barrels marked green glass. The shed door was open, so he went inside slowly but found no workers present. The interior was mostly more bins, but of brown glass. He found a worker's area with some overalls and hard hats hanging on the wall. He put the overalls on over his clothes and the ill-fitting hard hat on his head. He put the cap, wig, and glasses that went with his original disguise into a large pocket in his overalls.

Appropriately dressed, he went out to continue scouting the grounds. He walked around a small rise and through a screen of scrub and trees. From that vantage point, he saw that the yard was enormous. There were factory-size buildings, and from the contents around them, he knew one packaged paper into huge, compressed cubes, and the other sorted bottles. Mountains of scrap metal parts, with claw cranes and other junk, lay deeper in. He passed stacks of both metal cans and plastic bottles crushed into big cubes. Wizard Waste had to be a large, profitable operation, and though Joe remembered seeing its trucks before, he had always thought it was a small outfit. He found the employee parking lot and about forty vehicles, but the pickup and the sedan were not among them.

He spotted an on-site management office from the main parking lot and walked to it, giving friendly nods to a few workers he passed along the way. They nodded back, so it looked like no one would catch on to his trespassing. The office was a simple three-story gray-brick building with the company name and logo, so this was obviously not the head office. It would probably be downtown in a skyscraper somewhere. Joe thought about going in, then changed his mind and walked around back. There were a number of parking spaces there, but the pickup and sedan weren't among the vehicles. Just off the parking lot, he found a grassy area with a couple of picnic tables. From there, he saw another road winding in, so he cut across and walked on the roadside. This road ran past huge stacks of metal and scrap, and the clatter of the machinery and roar of

passing trucks was deafening. He followed the road all the way back, and it ended near the biggest mound of junk in the entire facility.

This mound appeared to be a discard area for every sort of thing that wasn't of immediate recycling use. The fence around it had been tacked with huge "Keep Out" signs, and to the side of the mound, he could see that they marked the perimeter. A tall board fence topped by barbed wire ran along the edge of the ravine. Scarred but sturdy, it would keep intruders and wildlife out, though security at this facility was mostly natural, due to its location.

Stepping off the road, he went along the fence at the front of the mound. This fence was made of rusted chain link tacked with old truck tires in places. Picking around in the mound seemed a silly idea, so Joe decided to turn back. Most likely, the vehicles were parked in one of the buildings or sheds. He paused to wipe the dust and sweat gathering at his brow, and while he shielded the sunlight, he saw something. He went farther in and found another small, partially enclosed parking area with a sheet-metal overhang. The vehicles in it were five pickup trucks and a sedan, but the drivers were not present. Scratching his head, Joe tried to figure out where they would go once exiting the vehicles. There was just the fence, the ravine, and the monster mounds of junk.

The GMC was there, and an older Chevy was there, too. He decided to run a check on the GMC truck. He memorized the plate number and began the walk back to the management office. Escaping the rumble of trucks and the road, he went to the back of the office building and, once clear, removed his hard hat and overalls. He placed them by a waste receptacle, put on his cap and wig, went to the front, and entered. The entry had various recycling instruction posters mounted as wall art. He went through a glass door to a customer service counter, which was under surveillance by bubble security cameras. The clerk, if he could be called that, made no move to leave his desk and provide counter service. Joe did not sit on the waiting area bench but rapped his knuckles on the counter and began to hum. This irritated the clerk. He pulled his eyes away from the computer screen and stood up. He walked over with a fuck-you expression on his face. He was a big man, wearing dress shoes, dress pants, and a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Bald, one gold earring, hairy tattooed arms, and a predatory chipped-tooth smile; he had more the feel of a bouncer in a sleazy bar.

"You in charge here?" Joe asked. He noticed one of the tattoos on his arm. The tattoo was a stylized version of a Baphomet head, like a Satanist or maybe an idiot who thought such a tattoo was sexy would wear.

"You see anyone else?"

"I'm here about an employee..."

"What name?" the clerk said, cutting him off.

"Well, I don't know the name."

"You here to waste my time? State your business."

"Sure. I put a scrape on a truck downtown, but the driver wasn't around. The lot attendant remembered the man saying he works here, but he didn't have the name. I

only have the plate number. I need you to check your parking records for the employee who owns the GMC pickup with the plate AZ 09864.”

The clerk’s eyes lit with sudden recognition, and his mood switched from uncaring to brutal. He was about to say something nasty when the big cell phone on his desk came alive with a silly tune. He went over and answered. His eyes flicked to Joe as he stepped away, talking in hushed tones. The man went through a swinging door and then came back out to the counter.

His words were stern, hostile. “I can’t help you with that. Employee records are confidential. Leave, and do not ask anyone questions. Unauthorized people are not allowed on this work site.”

Seeing they were on to him, Joe said nothing in reply. He shrugged, turned, and walked out the door. He was halfway across the management parking lot when four burly workers appeared. They were dressed similarly to the way he had been disguised for his walkabout, though the overalls and hard hats were a different color and label. The two vans they had emerged from remained parked askew at the side of the road. They were clearly positioning themselves to block him, walking farther apart than a group of four men normally would. All of them were large, with the overalls adding to the effect, and they all had hair leaning to the longish side sprouting from their hard hats. Three of the men were white, while the fourth man was black.

Joe halted as they confronted him in an open section of the parking lot. The man stepping up closer to address him was white. His heavy shocks of unkempt hair were about as attractive as Joe’s white-trash Elvis wig. He held a hard hat and a folded pair of overalls in his hands. “You forgot these,” he said with a sneer.

“Jeeze,” Joe said. “I hope this doesn’t mean I’m fired.”

It did, because it ticked the man off, and his short fuse blew. He threw the hard hat and overalls aside and charged in at Joe without thinking. Instead of grappling with the man as expected, Joe turned sideways, grabbed his left arm, and used his momentum to send him stumbling forward to trip and fall to the pavement. The other men did not fly into immediate action. They had expected their boss to take control of Joe. When it didn’t happen, their faces lit up with momentary surprise.

They aligned themselves to go in at Joe, and stepped side to side to prevent him from running away. Removing his glasses, Joe tossed them aside, knowing a hard scrap was ahead. It became obvious that the fallen man was in charge because they didn’t do anything more until he got up. He did that fast, and he was cursing. Then something else happened. One of the vans at the roadside still had a driver inside, and it roared over to the scene, turning as it went. One of the men ran to it and opened its rear doors.

Joe took a last quick look around. He saw the bald office clerk over at the edge of the lot with a big grin on his face and a gloss of sun on his head. There were three other male workers walking past the parking lot and astutely ignoring the scene. Joe’s eyes flashed to his opponents, and he caught a glimpse of tattoos peeking out of shirt cuffs and necklines. Two of the tattoos were of snakes, and he suddenly understood why he hadn’t seen any visible security on this site, even though there were warning and keep-

out signs everywhere. Workers or a clique of them policed this site, and they were all part of a gang or cult.

The boss man grunted and gestured, ordering the others in to tackle Joe. Pacing backward then around in a half circle, Joe struck forward and managed to land a hard punch to the jaw of one of the men coming in, knocking him down. He didn't get to see the man fall because the other two physically took him down, but they weren't organized about it, and partially collided with each other as they came on top of him. Reaching out with a forearm, Joe managed to knock one man's forehead to the pavement, stunning him. The other assailant was more of a strangler. He gained control and got both hands on Joe's neck. Using force, he got Joe flat on his back so he could squat on his midsection. Joe knew what was coming next; the man would use his strangler's grip to either cut off his air, start slamming his head into the pavement, or both. Once unconscious, they would throw him into the back of the van, and if that happened, it would be the end. They would take him somewhere, play with him if he remained alive, and then bury him.

Black lightning flashed in his mind, either from the fear of death or loss of circulation. Joe became energized and brought both hands, palms open, to the man's ears. The shock of it weakened the man's grip enough that Joe was able to force his head up, break the grip, and head-butt him.

The head butt did it; the man had a soft forehead. Joe threw him aside and felt a hard boot hit his right shoulder blade. The boss man was at him, and Joe's response was to roll with the kick and keep rolling until he could scramble up. He got up just as the man hit him, but it wasn't a punch but a take-down. This boss-man assailant was not a boxer but another grappler who wanted his man on the ground. Joe proved to be a better street fighter because he turned him as they went down, so the assailant took the hard bite of the pavement.

Breaking free, getting fast to his feet, Joe stumbled off on a run across the open section of the parking lot. He got a short distance and swung around a metal lamppost to check his back. The van's driver had emerged and was running toward him. The bald brute from the office was charging across the lot from another angle. This offered a chance of escaping on foot, so he turned and sprinted off as fast as he could. He felt no pain as the rush of adrenaline had killed that off.

The Wizard Waste Management site office was close to the entry road. If they had found him deeper in, he would not have had a chance. He did not look back until he was near the top of the rise, as he was getting used to foot races with fast opponents. This time, he'd been lucky. Two men remained out cold on the parking lot pavement. The boss man was on his feet but not running, and the other two, though running, remained far behind him. Unfortunately, the glance was enough to reveal another troubling event. The tall, thin man who had been driving the van had a handgun, and he suddenly stopped to take aim.

Joe went over the rise, hearing the ping of a shot that came nowhere near him. He continued running down the dirt road past the hut and green-glass bins and on to the fence. He went over the fence at a run, hearing a shot hit the metal. Through the entire ordeal, Joe's cap and wig, though knocked askew, had miraculously remained on his

head. At least until now. The headgear came off as he went over the fence and remained stuck on the top of the fence; retrieving it was not an option. Another shot rang off the side of his van as he got in, but he did not look back. Tires first kicking gravel, then squealing on the asphalt, he drove off, thinking that if he ever investigated Wizard Waste again, he would do it at nighttime. His assessment was that this brutal development was not good news for his client. Johan was in there somewhere, and his presence meant he had established ties between Cusac Demolitions and a waste-disposal company staffed by thugs bearing ugly occult tattoos. They would most certainly be involved in numerous illegal activities.

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The weather outside looked as gloomy and faded as the old factory itself. The trees still held a share of colored parchment, and the dry weeds and mounds in the lot below gave one the feeling of being in a dead world. Leaves scuffled along in the wind, creating an audible hiss on the sides of the building. Johan stared at the tall demolition fence around the property and became certain he was in a concentration camp, his life already destroyed as he waited for extermination in the gas oven. The payoff should have made him feel good, but for some reason, it did not. The situation didn't feel kosher. It felt like a lie, and his new friends certainly told mostly lies. Being psychopaths and psychopathic liars was the one thing they all had in common.

Shaking his head, Johan muttered, "No! No! What am I thinking?" Then he began to pace back and forth, his boots creating an irritating thumping on the floorboards.

Jalal looked up from the plans on the table. "For Christ's sake, Johan. I'm trying to think. You make me nervous."

"I couldn't be more edgy after a few minutes with Ali and Randy below. I hope you realize that we're standing above two big bombs, and from what I've seen working with those stupid fucks, we might be blown to smithereens at any second."

"Yeah, well, you scared me even more driving around with that dynamite and explosive bricks in the back. Jeeze, you drove out of here like a monkey in a stock-car race."

"That wasn't my fault. They said they had unloaded everything. And that's exactly what I mean. Those guys are more like rank amateurs. They can't even unload a truck, so how are they going to manage a major terrorist attack? We are using very crude methods, and something could go wrong. Now you're still going over the plans when Andras told me the plans were done."

"I'm just checking for anything that might go wrong. As for the crude bombs, if you could have acquired the advanced technology we wanted, it wouldn't be that way."

"I did the best I could. Everything is so ruthlessly tracked these days. Even jerks making pressure cooker bombs are busted. We have the plastic explosives to strengthen the bombs. The stuff we have will do the job; it's just the two monkeys in control of it that worry me."

"We can use some dynamite for a couple of other decoy detonations. The explosive power in total is quite impressive. You are right about the two stooges. They do act like

stupid fucks, but crude jobs are their area of expertise. Ali specialized in roadside bombs. His IEDs killed many people. They are basic and work. Cell-phone detonators, very simple timing ... and in this case, with the explosive power primed exactly right, it will work. The building will come apart and fall like shit through the goose. They will never trace anything to you. The plan is quite simple, really. We set the Liberty Import Complex to blow. Due to its structure, the collapse we want only requires two large bombs in the sub-basement. It comes down at an angle, putting tons of rubble and many dead bodies on top of the City Emergency Government Headquarters across the road. The entire staff they use to counter terrorist attacks will be inside and underground and will not be able to get out. They will be in there due to the note they received and the earlier small detonations on the other side of town. They will be preparing to send their assets to stop terrorist attacks at various locations. Unfortunately, the next attack will be to imprison them underground under rubble. Randy and Ali will then do a shopping mall massacre and die as martyrs. Many people will be dead. The rest terrorized. The job will be done. You will go back to your everyday life. And of course, you will be quite wealthy, due to our sponsors.”

“I suppose you are right. It should work. I just wish it was over.”

“Two great minds think alike, because I feel the same way.”

“The Liberty Complex, I mean, the age and makeup of it. It will send off a dust cloud that will engulf half of the city. I’ve been thinking of the detonation itself. I mean, shouldn’t you and Andras do it?”

“They were brought in for the job. They will die on the job and want the satisfaction of calling in the explosion first. They aren’t going to be anywhere near the site. They’ll call it in from here and then get on about the rest of the deal. Why should we argue with that? If anyone can be trusted to blow something up, it is them.”

“The follow-up mall shootings. I don’t like it. They might be identified.”

“Oh, that. Just before the job, you are to trash your personnel files on them, and our man in government will bury the rest. They will be identified, but not as the men you hired. There will be no record of you hiring anyone. They will be carrying ID at the end, and it will identify them as two terrorists who were somehow smuggled into the country. I’ve seen the Interpol photos that will be added to the new IDs, and they were taken when they were younger and look much different. Those shots will appear on the news. Trust me, no one will figure it out.”

Johan was about to say something to that, but Jalal’s cell phone tooted out some musical notes, and he walked away as he answered. Johan’s eyes shifted between the view out the window and Jalal pacing over by the stairwell. The way Jalal kept nodding and saying, u-huh, u-huh made Johan uneasy. This did not sound like good news.

Finally, when Johan was fully frustrated, Jalal ended the call and walked over. “Let’s take a stroll and check the perimeter fence. After that, we are taking Randy and Ali on a shopping trip. We are going to pick up some women’s clothing.”

Johan frowned at this strange news but said nothing. His moodiness remained as he followed Jalal down the stairs. He didn’t feel like asking more questions because the more he learned, the more he felt that things were about to come unglued. It was cloudy

outside with the odd burst of sun. Crunching through thistles, over mud ruts, and then through dead blueweed and nettles, Johan wondered why the perimeter fence was suddenly a concern. No one would try to break into this area other than squatters and the occasional serial killer. On the inside of the upper floor, they were well positioned to spot anyone arriving from most directions, especially by vehicle.

They reached the fence, and Jalal looked along it as he lit a smoke. He passed Johan a cigarette and lit him up. They both exhaled. "Your company puts up solid fencing. It's almost good enough for a prison, yet it's guarding a wrecked building. Even the few scavengers that might show up would probably be put off by all the warning and keep-out signs."

"Any particular reason why we are now worried about the fence?"

"There was an incident at Wizard Waste. You were there at the time. Some guy prowling around the grounds. Someone you might know. Good thing he didn't see you there."

Jalal pulled out his cell phone and brought up a photo. The shot was a black-and-white security camera photo of a man on the other side of a fence. It showed only the head and shoulders and the fence, but it was clear enough for Johan to recognize a familiar face. Initially, no name came to mind; then the hairstyle and intense eyes triggered a memory.

"Fuck, it's Joe Holiday!" Johan said. "If it weren't for the news, I'd only recognize his signature. Look at the expression on his face. He looks disturbed. Why was he at Wizard Waste? If he's on to us, it means big trouble."

"Andras says he doubts that. His contact in city security told him Holiday is on ice. If he gets caught trying to investigate any stuff, they'll jail him."

"He could tip them off. Why was he there?"

"We think it is payback for the earlier operation to kill him with a drone. It failed and put us short one bomb maker. Andras sent in a man to find out what the cops and Holiday uncovered. He found out that an old security guard at a warehouse tipped Holiday to Wizard. That security man died yesterday from a sudden heart attack. Our office manager says Holiday was disguised and snooping around the grounds, taking license plate numbers. Some of our staff cornered him, but he got lucky again and escaped."

Johan threw his hands up in the air. He grabbed the fence and shook it. Then he stepped back and booted the chain links. Flustered, he wiped his brow. "We need Holiday out of the way. If he spots me with any of you people, he will connect the dots. Can't you have men pick him up and put him on ice?"

"Relax. Holiday hasn't connected anything. He knows someone tried to ice him, but he has so many people that don't like him, he can't figure out who or why."

"You shouldn't leave him on the loose. Andras has enough men to easily grab him."

"He's gone rogue. Even our police contact has no idea where he is. He has abandoned his office and a condo he owns. Andras says if he is fishing around, he will come to us. We'll have him before he realizes the situation he's got himself into."

Johan snorted. "You are probably right. He's one man and has no credibility. He will play the wrong card soon, and it will bury him."

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Chapter Six: Shopping the Bomb

Johan stopped the car with hard braking, jolting his passengers. He glanced in the mirror before getting out to unlock the gate. The image of Ali and Randy refused to gel in his mind. It seemed odd, like a wispy hallucination. Probably the first reason was that they both chose to sit in the back, leaving the front passenger side empty. He had the suspicious feeling that neither of them would sit beside him because they felt he was unclean, inferior, or both. They were about the last two people on earth Johan would purposely select to be at his back. Both of them were outfitted in suit jackets and pants of a glossy fabric. Their shirts were white polo-style shirts with a weird golf club logo. The look didn't work, and neither did being dressed as twins seem right unless one of the two was a bastard twin.

Johan had gaped at their matching dress shoes as they walked out of the old factory, but he had said nothing. They were probably the most ridiculous dress shoes ever made – white leather, with thin, feminine laces and a doodle pattern of red and black on the toes. The shoes made a lasting impression. As a personnel director, Johan tried to think about what he would include in the assessment if two job applicants arrived wearing matching pairs of shoes. Would he describe the men as tacky, lacking sober judgment, two idiot foreigners? One good point was that he wouldn't describe them as terrorists. He would come up with some offbeat but politically correct assessment for their rejection slips. Perhaps he would note that the applicants tended to grin mysteriously without explanation. If it were possible, he'd describe them as qualified to work as genies. They would get the job if they were applying as genies, but of the type of genie whose jolly granting of wishes would lead to one's doom.

Johan opened the gate and got back into the car, choking as he did because Ali had lit one of the smelliest cigarettes in the world. Marijuana had a better fragrance than those cigarettes, and he did not want to know what was in them. Mainly because he was afraid Ali would casually announce he was smoking pure opium, heroin, or something worse ... if there was something worse.

The bumpy road out past demolition sites and then more decrepit industrial zones didn't cheer Johan, and neither did the foreign-language jabbering drifting to him from the back. He began to daydream again about using the payoff money to romance a new wife. He pictured a blond, then a redhead, both of ample proportions. Johan did not like skinny women. The thoughts calmed him for a few blocks until he found himself muttering, "What in the hell am I thinking?" A wife; after the last bitch, why would he even think about it? Classy hookers came to mind. He began to grin.

Then Ali broke the spell by asking, "Where are you taking us, what store?"

The answer popped from Johan's lips. "Super Venus, it's a new women's store. Takes up an entire wing of the mall."

Johan saw Randy in the mirror, nodding like he knew the place. "It is important that they dress modestly," he said.

"No, it isn't," Johan replied. "Jalal and Andras said they are to look westernized so as not to attract any attention."

Randy snorted. "No woman of mine dresses like a whore."

Johan swerved suddenly to avoid a grocery truck. He'd had his eyes in the mirror too long. "I knew it," he said in tones of distress.

Ali leaned over, blew in Johan's ear, and then whispered. "Knew what?"

"Stop doing that, I'm driving."

Ali giggled. "I enjoy seeing the kafir get angry. I thought the worshipers of Hitler were strong."

"What in the fuck is a kafir, anyway? I'm sure Hitler would not like this stunt we are up to now. I knew this women deal would be trouble. They weren't mentioned when I made the agreement, and I don't see the need for them."

Randy answered calmly. "The property management of the Liberty Import Complex was recently taken over by a friendly corporation in Qatar. Many international customers own spaces in it, but the property management is responsible for overseeing the closure before demolition. Our women are being transferred here to replace local employees who have been terminated. They start work tomorrow. Meaning they arrive as the new property manager and her assistants. Having full knowledge of the job, they will aid us. We will be arriving as contractors, and they will make sure we have access to place the bombs. We don't have control over the security firm that polices the complex because the law stipulates that only local security companies can hold the contract. Our lovely ladies will get us around security and keep the planted bombs secure."

Johan had been taking this news in quietly and factoring in the increased risk. "I don't like it. The company responsible for the early prep for the closure is Citywide Demo. My company gave them a contract. Cusac Demolition does the actual demolition, but your people didn't factor in Citywide because you couldn't have known. Citywide will have already replaced most security with the firm they contract with. How can we be sure security won't find the explosives?"

Ali chimed in his two cents' worth. "Easy, very easy. The property manager controls the security patrols. Our bombs will be in the sub-basement. That is the beauty of it. To tumble the central tower, we only need to take out the key supports."

"I don't see the beauty," Johan replied. "One nosey security guard could be our undoing."

"No," Randy said. "We are going to mark the areas as off limits, repair and construction zones. Believe me. Security guards are stupid. We've packaged the bombs so they wouldn't even recognize them if they found them."

Johan nodded and smiled. The clever disguise to camouflage the bombs had been his idea. "You are probably right. I've hired security guards before. There is nobody dumber

than they are, and they are rules-oriented. They won't even pass a barrier to look. My genius idea to disguise the bombs as generators will aid us tremendously."

Ali's grin quickly turned cloudy. "Your genius idea? I mentioned disguising them."

"True," Johan said. "But I supplied the casings and provided the plastic explosives to boost the bombs."

"Casings?" Ali replied. He threw a punch into Johan's shoulder. "You supplied two complete Polaris generators of the largest kind, sealed in the huge casings. My hands still hurt from all the work I had to do to gut them, fit the bomb stuff, seal the casings, and replace the wheels."

"Okay, okay ... you don't have to break my shoulder. I saw the difficult job you did. It was quite impressive. Are you sure you can make your timer work to explode both dynamite and plastic explosives simultaneously?"

"I do not know what simultaneously means. It will work to make a bigger boom; nothing will be wasted."

Johan pushed a hard, illegal left, pounded his horn, and shook his fist to intimidate another male driver who had the right of way. He narrowly avoided a collision, and then he pulled into the mall parking lot. A plating of clouds had moved in, making the day so dark it was almost night, and it highlighted the mall's glowing lights. This building resembled a clamshell, its overhanging roof gray and open. Shielded beneath it were three floors of brightly lit mall windows.

Even from a distance, they could see the crowds milling inside. The place didn't promise much excitement, but it was still uplifting compared to the gloom of the parking lot, where the overhead lot lights were on even though it was daytime.

The 'Super Venus' women's goods store took up the far right portion of the ground floor. Large billboard signs walled the perimeter of the parking lot near it. One sign was a collage of designer logos, the second was a sunglasses model. The third sign featured a woman modeling a dress. The fourth billboard, they didn't immediately notice, and Johan wouldn't have noticed it at all if Ali had not become mesmerized by it when they emerged from the car. The billboard featured a buxom, near-naked lingerie model.

Johan was about to walk off toward the store entrance. He turned back to see Randy looking up and saying, "Wow! Wow!" Ali stood there gaping with his mouth open in a way that made him look toothless. His staring eyes said he was in heaven, but his mouth slowly formed the words. "I would like this woman for my slave. But she must dress like this only in the bedroom."

"She is very sexy," Randy said, "but often when I see things like this I just want to blow them up."

"Man, are you guys conflicted," Johan interjected. "That is just a dumb broad modeling lingerie. Women fight for jobs like that. They all want to be sex queens. I can't figure you people at all, wanting four wives then crying foul when a woman takes her clothes off."

Ali didn't take his eyes off the billboard. "You would let your wife dress like this?"

“Sure, I mean, in the summertime. My wife wore practically nothing, and she had bigger boobs than that model. I didn’t care about the way she dressed; it was the cheating and bitching that got to me.”

“Bah,” Ali said. “You are a Western kafir, but maybe one of the better ones who at least looks at the woman instead of the man’s asshole. Yet still a weakling because you did not beat your wife when it was necessary.”

“I would have had to beat her every day. I never had the energy for that, and this isn’t Saudi Arabia; here it is illegal to beat your wife. Women have rigged the whole system into a deli machine to cut a man’s balls off.”

Randy turned and faced them. “I am not conflicted. He pointed a firm finger at the lingerie model. This represents all of the things I rejected when I converted to Islam. Yes, I might look at such a thing. Yes, I might have sex with her. Yes, I might keep such a woman as a slave. But I would not marry her, and I would fast for a full day after having sex with her.”

“See how Islam has made him a better man,” Ali said. “You, Johan, you love these corrupt things because you have been contaminated by the preachings of the mad apostle named Paul.”

“Apostle Paul ... you must be kidding. If they take me away in chains, it won’t be for preaching the gospel. Listen, let’s forget this argument and go in and get the clothes. We have a job to finish, remember?”

As they approached the Super Venus entrance, Johan took the lead. He didn’t exactly want to be seen with these two fools, and he was acutely aware of their bad manners. His own callousness was usually the problem, and it was one of the reasons for his divorce. It seemed strange to be the guardian of two screwballs, but he kept it in mind that he was really looking out for number one. Even so, there was only so much he could do. He simply stood and frowned after Ali caught his hand in the revolving door and drew eyes by stopping to mouth a long curse at it.

Randy grinned, but as they walked over to the aisles, Johan mentioned that in this country, cursing at doors and other inanimate objects could quickly get a person tagged as mentally ill.

“What, you calling me fucking crazy!” Ali said, stopping and pulling Johan’s arm to turn him to face him.

They were now standing in a rushing crowd that was fanning around them. The crowd was mostly women. “No, not crazy,” Johan said. “It’s like you are eccentric.”

“What is eccentric?”

“People who are geniuses are eccentric. They act just a little differently.”

“Eccentric, I like that. I am an eccentric genius,” Ali said loudly as a couple of elegant women gave him an icy stare and moved quickly around him.

Randy glanced around. “This place is too big, and it is like a maze. I have no idea what to buy. So many women, and the perfume arouses me.”

“Keep it in your pants,” Johan said. “I know how to navigate nuisance places like this. We’ll get a shopping cart. You give me that list with their sizes, and I load in some items. We will be out of here in no time.”

Ali tapped Johan on the shoulder. He’d taken a chocolate bar from a display and was taking a bite from it. With his free hand, he pointed at a man standing at the end of an aisle. With his mouth full, Ali said, “That man is watching us; a homosexual perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” Johan replied. “Perhaps he is also the store's loss prevention officer, and he is watching us because you didn’t pay for that candy bar you are eating.”

“Perhaps there are two of them,” Randy said. “That one was in the store already. One other came in behind us from the parking lot and stopped to watch where we were going. He is over there somewhere.”

Johan snapped the list out of Randy’s hand. “Perhaps we’ll just barrel through here. Don’t worry about those guys. Keep the wrappers of anything you eat. So long as we pay when we leave, they can do nothing.”

With Johan in the lead, they walked over to get a cart and then headed for the shoe section. True to his words, Johan did not waste any time. He checked the list, then went to various displays, looked over some shoes, and tossed four pairs into the cart. He was ready to move on when he saw Ali studying a pair of shoes.

“Listen, Ali. I know your taste in shoes is extraordinary, but take my word, the shoes I picked will do.”

Ali did not get a chance to answer as a clerk stepped over. “Sir,” she said to Johan. “You are supposed to take the boxed shoes. The display models are not for sale.”

“Really,” Johan said. “These shoes have price tags on them. If they are not for sale, it is false advertising.”

The clerk was about to reply, her eyes flicked to Ali, who had his eyes staring wide and fixed on the low neckline of her dress. Sensing that these people were trouble, and spotting the loss prevention officer over by a post, she simply turned and walked away.

Johan moved on with the cart. Randy pointed to a gated section with racks of dresses. “Not there,” Johan said. “We can’t take the cart in on the fancy hardwood floor, and those are all party and club dresses. Believe me, Ali would not let a woman wear any of them, and the prices are big numbers.”

Though the store had wide aisles and open display areas, it was still teeming with female shoppers, and all of them instinctively avoided Johan and his pals. That put the spotlight on them even more, and if they were to steal anything, the cameras would easily catch it because avoidance created a constant, clear view of them. Johan made a mess in one section as he threw pairs of jeans around until he found some that were suitable. “Since they might be joining you at the factory, they’ll want something other than just office clothing,” he said. Then, when it came to deciding whether to buy dresses or pantsuits, he chose dresses and carefully selected items modest enough to please Ali.

They moved through an area of junk jewelry, and Johan checked and saw that the jewelry wasn't on the list. The last section to pass through on the way to the checkout was the ladies' lingerie and underclothes section. Johan quickly selected packaged items, threw them into the cart, then changed his mind and replaced them with other items. He brushed off a sales lady who offered service as he concentrated on this and did not notice Ali walking away with her. He looked up from the cart at Randy and said, "Okay, let's check out of here." Then he noticed that Ali was not with them. He was over in a large display area, looking at lingerie with the saleslady.

Standing beside a mannequin dressed in a slip, Ali and the clerk faced two other mannequins. The first displayed a babydoll nightgown and the second a bikini night piece composed of a bra and thong underwear. The clerk, a redhead with pale skin, was very clearly blushing, indicating that Ali's conversation was definitely lacking in sophistication. Johan could see that they were engaged in a brief discussion, but the irritating store music and the din of the crowd carried away the words.

Reading lips was not one of Johan's talents. He looked to Randy, "Let's get Ali out of the store before he gets us in trouble."

Randy nodded, and they strolled over with the cart, arriving just as Ali was saying, "Why do you wear your hair short like a boy?"

"This is a common hairstyle and popular," the saleslady said.

Ali put his hand on the mannequin with the babydoll outfit. "Can you model this for me?"

"Not today. I'm not a model, and I don't feel like being pinched in the rear again. Modeling only takes place on the second Saturday of every other month. If you come by then you can see all of the outfits on models."

"I will be in paradise by then, but I might need this now. How do we try this clothing on?"

Johan was about to intervene, but his throat was dry, and all he could get out was half a word before he started coughing. Randy looked at the scene like another interested customer. The saleswoman's face showed confusion at Ali's statement, and then she suddenly wore a knowing look. "Oh, I see. You would like to purchase this item to wear yourself. That is not a problem. We have many customers like you and ..."

She didn't finish her reply. Johan, staggered by a fresh burst of coughing, managed to reach out and pull Ali to him. This did not please Ali as anger stamped his face. A uniformed security guard now flanked them on one side, and the loss prevention officer was on the other. They were still several steps away, but watching with interest, and this brought Randy to life. He stepped between Ali and the saleswoman and said, "We are leaving right now, Ali. Come."

Ali did not want to leave. "She insulted me ... she is calling me a"

Johan kept hold of Ali's arm, and they rushed him over to the shopping cart, then moved toward the checkout. Ali tried to glance back, but Randy kept him moving forward. Johan was fortunate as Ali remained at a loss for words, and they managed to bully their way into a checkout counter that a cashier was opening. Since the loss prevention officer and the security guard had tagged along and were a ways off and watching, Johan made a display of showing the cashier the two candy bar wrappers. He paid for

the entire purchase with cash Andras had provided, and once everything was bagged, they were clear to leave. Johan motioned for Randy to take one of the shopping bags, but he simply ignored that command and stood there with his hands in his pockets. Irritated, Johan swept the bag up, and they moved for the exit.

Johan took a deep breath of fresh air as they exited the store, then he noticed Ali and Randy producing cigarettes. "Listen, let's hang out here while you smoke that stuff. I don't like the fumes in the car; it throws my driving off."

"Sure thing, boss," Ali said as Randy lit him up.

Johan didn't exactly like the fragrance of their cigarettes anywhere, so he stepped over by an empty bicycle rack and looked out at the distant traffic. The highway was jammed, vehicles forming a long train under a sky that threatened rain but failed to deliver it. When he looked back, he saw the 'Super Venus' loss prevention officer and the security guard approaching Randy and Ali, so he stepped over quickly to head them off. When the security guard tried to step around him, he reached out and addressed him. "Is there a problem here?"

"Not with you, it's your friend we want to talk to."

"Which friend?"

The guard then pointed to Ali and stepped over to him. He stepped back quickly as Ali exhaled in his face.

The loss prevention officer moved in behind Ali. Burly and with a ruddy complexion, the officer was definitely trouble. This flustered Johan. He addressed the security guard, "Now wait a minute here. I paid for those candy bars, and you saw me pay. This is harassment."

"No, it isn't," the guard said. "We just want your friend to empty his coat pockets, and if he's clean, he can go."

"What?" Johan said. "You can do bag searches, but you can't search anyone's pockets. That's the law. I've read about this sort of harassment in the news. It's called Islamophobia."

"Maybe you'd like to check my pockets?" Randy said, leaning in to him.

"No. You are fine. We don't want to check your pockets, just the other man."

"Well, that's certainly a good thing," Randy said. "Because if either of you so much as touches me, I will paint the pavement with your broken bodies."

Johan's eyes flashed back to the loss prevention officer standing behind Ali. He noticed a gleam. Handcuffs hung partway out of the man's right pocket. Johan's face reddened. This was obvious intimidation. A moment earlier, he'd been worried Randy would lose it, and now he was worried that the real Johan, the Mr. Hyde Johan, might break loose. Even more irritating was Ali, who stood there calmly smoking as though nothing unusual was going on.

"Ali," Johan snapped. "These men want to see what is in your coat pockets. Turn them out."

Remaining calm to the point of being placid, Ali turned out his left coat pocket, revealing a pack of Turkish cigarettes, a lighter, a stick of gum, and crumpled note paper.”

“There, you see,” Johan said. “It’s just standard pocket litter. What’s the matter with you people?”

The loss prevention man didn’t answer; the security guard did, his accent and overly polite speech revealing his Indian extraction more than his skin color. “You are certainly right, sir,” he said to Johan. “We are very sorry for this inconvenience. However, we would like to see the contents of his right pocket.”

Ali blew out another puff of smoke. Randy grinned. Johan didn’t feel nearly so happy. He glared at the security guard, looked to the loss prevention officer, then snapped his fingers. “Ali, show them what is in your pocket.”

“Why are you snapping your fingers at me? No one snaps fingers at me.”

“Okay, sorry ... but for Christ’s sake, be mad at them, not me.”

“I am a Muslim. I do not believe in Christ. I do not like snapping fingers. But I do believe that what I have in my pocket belongs to them.”

Disbelief showed on Johan’s face. “What in the hell are you talking about? You couldn’t possibly have anything that belongs to them.”

Ali took the last drag of his cigarette. He exhaled. He dropped the butt and slowly crushed it with his foot, then he put his hand in his right pocket and removed the contents, which at first appeared to be a black ball. He then took it in both hands and unraveled two pairs of black lace panties. He turned slightly, held one pair toward the loss prevention officer, and waved the other pair at the security guard. “I believe these are what you are looking for. These are the panties, you Western crusaders wear.”

The surprised security guard stepped back as if Ali might be holding a bomb. The loss prevention officer’s face tightened with rage. “That’s it, you are under arrest.” He nodded to the security guard and produced his handcuffs.

Johan knew this was serious trouble. There would be a fight, and there would be police. Their cover might be blown. He was ready for the worst and steeled himself, but instead of the worst happening, there were shouts.

A woman’s voice, “Stop that man! He has my purse!”

Twenty feet away, a big man ran agilely through the parked cars, pursued by an angry woman. He did have a purse, and he suddenly threw it, sending its contents spilling over the hood of a Jeep as he kept running. The loss prevention officer and the security guard had their adrenaline up as they had been about to wrestle Ali and cuff him. Now that adrenaline sent them running in pursuit of the purse-snatcher. They didn’t do well in that race, as the man was a fast runner and leading them across the lot toward a drive-thru taco joint out by the highway.

“Who is that man?” Randy said. “I thought he was another store cop. He was in the store with us.”

“He’s a thief,” Johan said, “and he’s a lucky break. Ali, toss those panties. We’re getting out of here right now.”

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Joe Holiday stood in the gloom of the parking lot observing Johan and his two pals discuss a humongous billboard overlaid with a shot of a lingerie model. He wasn’t particularly worried about them spotting him and recognizing him. His disguise was another effective cover, and he had tested it in the past: fake beard, baseball cap worn backward, and casual clothes, all a size too big, worn and faded. Joe’s standard real-life look was to be clean-shaven, wearing either smart casuals or a suit. He knew that any disguise that included his usual style would not work. Close contact would be avoided at this time, and that aided the disguise. He needed to gain information on where they were going and what they were doing. His tail would remain close enough to follow yet avoid drawing suspicion.

When they walked off toward Super Venus, he said, “What in the hell?” aloud. Joe had just finished speaking with Johan’s boss, though he hadn’t told him much other than that he believed Johan was up to some unnamed fishy business. Gerard Cusak’s reply had been to order Joe to stay on him and make sure he didn’t get into any public trouble ... especially trouble of the sort that would appear in the media.

Keeping Johan out of trouble was a laughable idea now. Joe knew that with certainty. The hard evidence existed in the two bombs sitting in the sub-basement of the old factory, and the blood that was down there from what was likely a killing they had done. If Johan and his boys had gone near any graveyard, it would have been to bury the body. Joe’s opinion was that while they were at it, they should have dug their own graves to save the state a dollar, because the time was coming soon. They would definitely be laid out for burial, and the only question in Joe’s mind was whether he would do it or someone else would get lucky and come in for the kill. A man like Jason Kufner would definitely enjoy putting the notches on his gun belt.

While creeping around the old factory earlier, he had nearly missed all of the key evidence. It took the better part of two hours inside the dark, smelly place, all of that time with the two men, Ali and Randy, also present. Avoiding them had not been difficult because they had remained on the upper floor listening to a foreign radio station nearly the entire time.

Joe had kept the place under observation from a distance and moved in on foot when only the two were present. They had no window view to the north, so he’d come in that way and vaulted the fence. Dashing in and up to a top post, he had high-vaulted over. The maneuver would have been extremely dangerous if improperly executed. The high layers of barbed wire caught his jacket, leaving a stylish rip, but he made the jump and, once on the ground, decided not to try it again. Next time, it would be a professional method.

A small study of the two men’s habits had aided surveillance. Randy was observant and had to be tracked with the greatest care. Johan and Ali bristled with foolish overconfidence. They didn’t notice they were being tailed, and they surely felt in control

of things. At this point, the tail had to be constant, tracking them everywhere until he discovered the details of their insane plans.

The bombs were currently stored in what had once been a freezer room. Packed in generator cases, they had handles and wheels for easy transport. Without doubt, they planned a powerful terrorist attack, but Joe doubted they were planning to blow up Super Venus. Perhaps there was access through to the mall's basement where they could plant the bombs and collapse the entire structure. If so, it meant they were going inside for a solid look around. Knowing he had to find out whether they had a contact in the store, Joe started moving across the lot.

He allowed them to get in well ahead of him and nearly laughed when he saw Ali caught in the door. Joe waited, but they moved more slowly than expected, and he spotted Randy looking his way when he entered. Joe also observed the store's loss-prevention officer looking their way and ducked off to the left. It became cat-and-mouse; Joe did not want Randy to catch on to his tail, and both the loss prevention officer and a security guard were tracking their movements in the store. A peek here, a glance there... Joe followed their obnoxious behavior and quickly learned that they were purchasing items for ladies without contacting anyone. In itself, it was an interesting turn of events, and he could not guess exactly how ladies fit into this picture. The only lady tagged to them so far was one who no doubt considered the three bottom-of-the-barrel rejects. She definitely would not send them out to buy her clothing, and the items they selected were not her pricey style.

The short shopping spree was definitely an oddity. Joe knew the store camera operator would follow the men, hoping to catch that opportune moment when one of them stole something. Joe didn't think it would happen. Yes, they were three dangerous idiots, but not shoplifters by profile. Ali did fit the profile of a foreign habitual criminal who could suddenly get involved in any crime. That profile proved correct. Joe glanced over exactly as Ali pocketed two items.

Joe's paymaster for this case, Gerard Cusak, did not want them to get into any public trouble. It meant figuring out how to keep them out of it and where exactly it would happen. Shoplifting meant they would approach Ali as soon as he exited the store, so Joe quietly exited and waited. They emerged far sooner than expected, so they must have bullied their way through the line-up. Johan carried the shopping bags, so Joe wondered whether it was in fact Johan buying something for some women. If so, Gerard Cusak would probably want to know who these women were.

Moments later, the loss-prevention man and the security guard emerged just behind them, causing Joe to forget about the women. His mind went back to how he would extract them from the situation. He watched the men light cigarettes. A short minute passed, then the store cops approached them.

From that point, the situation developed extremely fast and was certain to lead to Ali's arrest and chaos. Joe's eyes flashed to a group of women emerging from the store. He selected a healthy specimen with a feral fashion-model face and an icy expression that said, 'Do not approach unless expecting a total put down.' Joe did approach, swiping her purse from her with a clean and accurate gesture. There was a scream, but Joe gave her no time to struggle. A paid actor could not have done better than this woman;

she pursued him on foot, shouting out cries for help. She gave up the chase immediately when he sent the purse's contents scattering across the hood of a Jeep.

Joe's disguise included running shoes that allowed him to sprint. He glanced back, but really didn't have to because he knew they would be after him. A purse-snatcher would be a big catch for these shopping-mall coppers. The parking lot wasn't exactly empty. A number of other people were present, but as Joe expected, they did nothing but watch the scene as if it were a clip in a movie. This mall lot was big, and Joe ran toward the highway; the only establishment at its edge was a taco outlet called Mexitaco. The joint was a drive-thru and had a pedestrian entrance by the parking lot. It was also busy; the gloom allowed Joe to see figures moving inside, but not in any detail.

The security guard and the loss-prevention officer slowed their pursuit by shouting for him to stop, but that wasn't going to happen, as being arrested wasn't part of Joe's plan. Initially, the faster runner of the two, the loss prevention man, quickly lost his wind. Joe took another look back just before he entered Mexitaco and saw that he'd stopped and was trying to catch his breath as he leaned on the hood of a car. Ten years of making easy shopping mall arrests and eating the junk food on the premises had primed the man for collapse. Most other times, he probably had the baton-wielding security guard do the running for him. Joe's assessment from the beginning had been that the security guard would be the most trouble because the man was tall, young, strong, and of Indian racial extraction. He'd met the type before and knew they were far too dedicated to the job and their interpretation of law and order. This sort of security guard would not give up the chase; he would want the arrest to decorate his record. That proved true as he decided to abandon his collapsing partner and continue the pursuit.

Mexitaco featured a long wooden bench with seating by a wall, some center tables, and a set of stools at a long counter along the window. Most of the window spots were occupied, and since the people were sitting with their backs to the window, they would have seen Joe run across the parking lot. There was one stool open, and the previous customer had left his garbage tray on the counter. Joe took the stool immediately and watched the security guard run the last few yards between the cars and then enter.

What followed demonstrated how just about anyone could vanish in a crowd. The security guard, supposedly a trained and licensed guard, burst into the taco joint with his baton out, looked desperately around, and then ran out the opposite door into the parking lot. As Joe had simply sat down without harassing or addressing anyone, the patrons went about their business of enjoying the food. Thirty seconds passed, then the security guard came back in and began to walk around. Joe simply remained seated, facing away from him, looking out the window. He counted another thirty seconds during which the security guard rushed into the washroom and then rushed out. The guard slowly walked around, then Joe heard him standing behind him, and the sound of him slapping the palm of his hand with the baton.

Joe knew he now posed a problem, as the security guard did not want to risk a potentially violent arrest by himself in a taco joint outside the main mall. Since Joe was looking across the parking lot, he also knew the security guard was in bigger trouble than that, because his partner had not gotten back up but had collapsed completely onto the pavement, with a crowd gathering around him.

Not wanting to be responsible for killing someone, Joe simply turned on the stool, faced the guard, and said, "Officer. I think you'd better look after your partner. He's down and out over there, and he isn't getting back up."

The statement created a mental conflict that led to brain freeze. The security guard realized that he should have done a closer check before abandoning his partner. He realized that although Joe was dressed scruffy and certainly looked scruffy, his diction and calm voice did not fit the profile. In shopping mall arrests, anyone who didn't fit the profile of scruffy or criminal with a record would be in legal trouble.

Joe knew a decision was coming in about two seconds. If the decision was to hold him for arrest, he would bolt. It didn't come to that. The guard's radio crackled with the voice of an excited dispatcher. "Officer Verma! Officer Verma! LPO Sally is down in the parking lot. Abort chase. Get to the scene and apply CPR!"

This command panicked the guard. He put away his baton, pulled up his radio, and ran for the door, nearly shattering the plate glass as he exited. Joe didn't wait and watch but got up immediately and went into the restroom. He yanked off the beard and the wig, then put on the glasses from his shirt pocket. The coat he reversed to its better side. He removed his outer baggy pair of pants, revealing new slim-fit jeans underneath. Using a few towels, he cleaned the scuff marks off his shoes, then put his disguise in a plastic grocery bag and walked out. He strolled right past the scene of the fallen loss prevention officer. A female cashier from the taco place was on scene and had a LifeLine heart shocker on his exposed chest.

Joe stood at the fringe of the crowd watching, standing only a few feet from the security officer named Verma. He remained until he saw that the man's heart had been revived, and then he strolled across the lot to the van. Two police cruisers pulled in as he left, but he paid them no heed. He drove off with the factory as his destination, certain they were returning there. The fact that they'd left the location unguarded while on this shopping outing was a sign of sloppiness. But they wouldn't be so sloppy as to leave the place for long. On the highway, he wondered how many people would simply die from the shock of a terrorist attack. The nagging thought in his mind was that he was working to prevent an attack and had nearly killed one man already. Pretending he was working for Johan's employer was really just fooling himself. He was really working for himself. Sure, he would be paid, but the real job ahead would be tough, and failure was not an option. No amount of money would cover the risks.

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Mist was rolling in with the gloom, Joe tramped through wet leaves and duff to the spot where he had hidden the van in the pines. He had watched the factory for a while with binoculars, but none of the men had returned as expected. Perhaps they had gotten into some kind of trouble after the shoplifting incident, which pissed Joe off. Failing to stay on them tightly meant he was probably missing some important information.

Once inside the van, he hit a button on the RJ37. Joe had planted sleeper transmitters in important places inside the factory. These bugs were voice-activated. The only thing they had recorded recently was the squeal of a rat, so he knew they hadn't returned and

then left again before his arrival. The transmitters were built with stealth technology, making them difficult to detect. The automatic gain control provided good audio quality, but to date, their conversations had been in the upper living area. Joe had managed to get a bug outside the door, though he had not been able to search the area. That space was large and open, and the shitty music they played at full volume had masked all their conversations. His technology was good, but bugs had limitations, and there were glitches in the sound even in the best circumstances.

Joe thought about getting inside and planting a bug while they were out, but he remembered they had a quality padlock on that upper door. It would be locked until their return. He ate a bagel with cheese and drank coffee from a thermos while he considered the risky job of climbing up to plant a bug on the window ledge. He was about to get out of the van when one of the transmitters activated with the sound of a vehicle. It meant they were pulling inside the back section of the factory. He had two bugs there, as it was a priority area where he had seen them smoking and talking.

A door slammed. He heard Johan's whiny voice. "I still don't understand why you had to knife him. I had the situation under control. Jeeze, there could have been witnesses."

"There were no witnesses," Randy said. "We pulled over in a blind spot."

"No cars were passing by when I did it," Ali said authoritatively. "None until after I put the body in the back."

"Yeah, but some drivers saw our vehicle and his parked on the side of the road."

"Stop worrying," Randy said. "They'll never remember, and if it comes on the news about a missing person, they probably won't see it."

"Okay. I'm getting him out of the boot. Where are we going to put him?"

Ali laughed. "Look at the stupid expression on his face."

"I don't find it funny," Johan said. "At least the coat I put under him soaked up the blood. That makes cleanup a lot easier."

Randy's voice came in loud, so he had to be almost right next to the bug. "Look, his ID says he's an accountant."

"Fucking figures," Johan said. "A nasty bastard, with nothing to do but tailgate people and curse at them. Usually, I just sock guys like him. That's what I was about to do. I didn't expect you to step over and plant a blade in him."

"Those were my orders," Ali said. "Kill anyone who gets in the way."

Randy snorted and replied. "I think that order meant in the way of our plans. This man had no idea about our plans. Too late now, let's carry him downstairs. We can chop him up and bury him here. It is the easiest way."

"You can do that without me," Johan said. "I'll help carry him down, then I'm going home for a rest. You can call me when you need me."

Randy answered. "You can go, but don't talk to anyone or hang around with anyone. Any old friends are off limits."

Joe raised an eyebrow as the sound cut out. They were carrying the body below, so he was sure he would pick up some conversation there. It didn't take much thinking to guess what had happened. Johan's driving was the clue. Without doubt, he had pissed off some accountant, and it had led to a showdown on the roadside. Road rage incidents were obviously something Johan got into regularly, and at any other time, the incident would have ended without murder. Unfortunately, for the accountant, the bit of argument he'd expected had turned into the quick stroke of Ali's blade. Death became the final word.

A couple of minutes passed, then Joe heard some thumping and banging. The voices were muffled snatches of conversation. A radio came on, blaring some pop music. This had happened before, but upstairs. Today, they were listening to music composed for the 12-year-old girl market. It was giving Joe a fast headache, and his thoughts turned sour. He was watching them because he wanted to know their plan for the bombs. He had not planned to nail them for a random murder. It was irritating. If following them meant a trail of bodies, how would he ever find his way out of this mess?

The radio suddenly shut off, and he heard clear voices. A couple of curse words in a foreign language, and then, "Over here," and "Put him on that chair."

"See how fast I made this noose. I used to hang people in Iraq. Now put it on his neck like this and throw it over that ceiling pipe. We set the light at the right angle. With the blood dribbling from his mouth, it looks like we hung him and dropped him in the chair."

Johan's voice came in, volume rising. He was walking into the room and saying, "What the fuck is this about?"

Randy replied. His voice measured. "A video."

"A video? Why?"

"You don't need to know. You can go home for a while."

"Go home. Sure. I don't think I want to know what this is about. I need a beer."

Randy answered. "Have some potato chips, too. Don't worry. This is nothing strange. I will tell you. After the bombing, we do our suicide run. Maybe take some hostages. We may die at any time, and if that happens, we won't be able to upload a final statement. Filming a video now, using this dead unbeliever as a prop, makes certain that martyrdom will not get in the way of our political goals. The world wants a statement, and it will get one."

"It sure will," Johan said. "With that ghastly body in the background, it will be a statement that causes many people to lose their lunch. A statement that I can wait to see at the very end, when it is all over. I sure as hell don't want to see it now."

"We want it to be a surprise," Ali said. "You go now, and we will do our job."

Johan's fast exit was picked up by the bugs, as was the arrival of Jalal. Joe zeroed in on that brief conversation, filtering out Randy and Ali. The car door slammed as Jalal got out. "Going somewhere?" he said to Johan.

"Yes, I'm making a rare end-of-the-day appearance at work. As far as the boss knows, I might have been there all day. Cusak is coming in at four thirty, so I have arranged an

interview with some prospective employees then. When I come out, I will BS him and get him to sign off on a few items in the budget.”

“Okay, but keep your big trap shut. Don’t do anything to make him suspicious. We’re on the home stretch and want you close by now. After this, you won’t be back at work until it is over. By the way, is that small errand done?”

“I bought the clothes. There were a couple of complications, but things are okay.”

“What complications, can’t you do anything right?”

Johan cleared his throat. “Well, uh. I don’t have time to get into it right now. See the boys below, and they’ll brief you.”

“I’ll do just that. Be back this evening. You’re making a trip to the airport. A pickup. I will send you a text with instructions.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Johan said, and the door of a car slammed.

Joe’s thoughts switched back to Ali and Randy, with the news of the airport on his mind. There would be no break tonight. He would have to do surveillance on them, and that would be difficult at the airport. It was hard to imagine this group of terrorist idiots even getting near an airport without being arrested. But without doubt, they would somehow get through it. If he was learning anything from this case, it was that the secret of terrorism involved very little genius. People who could blunder their way to the finish line and hit the blow button before being taken out did it. Only this time, he planned to make sure they didn’t hit that button, or that it wouldn’t work.

Joe bolted upright as a loud voice rang in his ears. “Cut! Cut! Ali, you can’t say that while slapping the body in the face. Put his head back the right way. Remember that he is a prop. Arranged with the noose, the chair, and the lighting, he is scary. He is very obviously dead. You just point to him with your right hand as you reach highlights in the speech. Now keep your eyes intense, your face fierce, pace deliberately, and gesture firmly with the handgun in your left hand. The point is terror. We will strike fear into the hearts of the crusaders and inspire our people worldwide to launch immediate attacks.”

Ali began again, and Joe had no difficulty picturing his gestures and movements as he spoke. “Heroic soldiers of Allah, sleeper cells awake to our victory. Reveal this video to all of the brothers and sisters in the nations of Islam. Alahu Akbar! We have struck the crusaders with the iron fist of Al Qaeda! They have perished in the flames of our bombs! Cooked like the pigs they eat, dead like this evil leader of crusaders you see beside me. He suffered, he wept, and begged for mercy, and we delivered him to the fires of hell. A noose, even a noose, is too good for them, and when Sharia Law is established, full justice will be done. Go forward today and honor this mighty battle ... stab them, shoot them, bomb them, bury them, and join us in the martyrdom we will obtain today in the final struggle. See how they are weak, cringing, dying ...”

A gunshot sounded. “Okay. I’m cutting it here,” Randy said.

“Was it good?” Ali replied.

“Visually, yes, but your speech may need a rewrite. I didn’t expect you to end by pumping a bullet into his chest, but it looks great on camera. I can do a number of shots

and blend them to make one smooth video. I have an app to do it on the phone. There is one problem: I should be in the video. It will be distributed worldwide. I should share in the glory. Perhaps when Jalal gets here, he can shoot some video. He is a little better at doing this cell phone video stuff than I am. He has software on his laptop, everything that makes what is essentially a low-quality, low-budget video into something that has an effect when viewed from your everyday cell phone.”

“I can shoot some video,” Ali replied. “You say you can blend clips together. You can stand to the left with the flag behind you. Stand there for a moment. Let me step back. See, the shahada on the big black flag comes out nice behind you. Toss me the cell phone. Cross your arms and pull that table over so the rifle on it shows. Now stare, stern ... angry. That’s it; now hold the pose while I take a minute of video.”

The bugs were working so well that Joe heard the men breathing and Randy sighing as the video clip was taken. Ali spoke. “Now, when you blend it, the full shot will have you standing stern next to the body.

A door slammed, Joe heard footsteps, and Jalal’s voice. “That fucking Johan. He should have told me you killed someone. This is very uncool. Why is that dead guy sitting there with a noose around his neck?”

“Relax,” Randy said, his voice cool, soothing. “The operation is in no danger. We hid this man’s car. There were no witnesses to the killing. By the time they even find out he’s dead, our job will be done.”

A deep breath. Jalal’s voice. “I told Johan to make sure nothing happened. He isn’t doing his job.”

“His job is to die, like the others,” Ali said.

“That is certain, and the sooner the better. Okay, I get that you men killed this jerk, but why is he sitting here? You plan on eating lunch with him, or is it just a few selfies so you can relive the memory?”

“This answer is very simple, and it hasn’t been discussed. Before claiming martyrdom, we have to be certain that video evidence crediting al Qaeda will be released. We don’t want a situation like the one in France, where other groups took the credit for our bombings. It can happen, and it has happened, but it won’t happen this time.”

“I thought we agreed on no cell phone use, especially not that kind of use.”

Ali answered, saying, “It has no online connection. We are using the video feature just as you do. We always use cell phones now. Cheap and they do the job.”

Jalal’s tone calmed. “Alright, but make sure it is stored here. Tonight, the airport. Johan will be back. He will drop you off, but he doesn’t go in with you. You meet the women, give them the goods you picked up shopping, and drop them at the address provided. Johan will drive you back. The car will be a stretch limo.”

“I thought we weren’t using rental cars for anything.”

“It’s okay. It will be rented through Johan, not us. On the basis that he is an Uber driver. So be ready at eight and at the gate for pickup. At this stage of the game, Andras, Lena, and I are keeping a low profile. The plans are in play, so there is no need for contact

unless there is a problem. So don't kill Johan yet. If there is any problem, you send him a message."

A tongue clicked. "I wanted to kill the fat Johan tomorrow. This is sad news."

"Call it incentive," Randy said. "You do things smoothly, and we will kill Johan before the end."

"Now that's positive thinking," Jalal said. "We can lunch on it, but not in this filthy room. The food is upstairs, so let's go up."

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Chapter Seven: Betrayal

The taxi cruised into the back lot of the restaurant, and Andras and Lena emerged from the car. There were no spotlights at the back, though the staff parking lot was there. As the taxi drove off, they stood in the faint neon light, lighting up cigarettes. Lena's cigarette was cannabis laced with an upper, while Andras smoked an American butt, a Marlboro. He opened a silver case and popped three round pills of pure codeine into his mouth. Once or twice a week, he popped those, and it meant a flare-up, and severe lung pain, that would be in evidence as his voice became reduced to a wheeze.

The restaurant was named Poseidon, and it served Greek food. Andras owned it, though that was not on the books. The upper lounge, reached via a back staircase, was not on the books either, though drinks and food were served, and the elite circle of Andras' Luciferian chapter hung out there at night. Most of them were also employees of his recycling company, but not all of Andras' employees were Satanists. Some of his people were from a laborers' union, and others were illegal-immigrant gang members. His father had been a union boss, and as a boy, witnessing union struggles, Andras became convinced that he would never be a union man. He started a tiny business as a teen, a high school dropout, and grew it. He became a boss, but the union connection remained; they were part of the extended family and sometimes useful in exercising power. The key connecting his old union and the new Luciferians was drugs. Both moved drugs in bulk, so there were some crossover connections.

Luciferians and Satanists formed a class structure in Andras' worldview. The sophisticated Luciferians were of a higher order, viewing Lucifer as the Light Bringer and a font of wisdom. Satanists celebrated rebellion and were thus the lower class. Like the brutes that Andras gave lower-rung recycling jobs.

Lena exhaled while Andras nursed his cigarette, waiting for his potent medication to take effect. The only light at the back came from a neon trident, casting their faces in a wash of pale blue. The ornate trident inside a magic circle was the logo of Poseidon's sign. At the front, it was embedded in a big sign with seafood images. Only at the back, with the bright trident head pointed down at the entry door, did its symbolic meaning seem present. It was also the logo of Andras' chapter, a key group within a worldwide organization.

A sound like a shot echoed across the ravine behind them, and they both turned. A forest of high-rises stood on the far side of the ravine. All the buildings were public

housing, and a gunshot from there was not unusual. Lena was the nervous sort, and her first conclusion was always that someone was shooting at her.

“Relax,” Andras said. “Some guy just shot his wife over there, that’s all.”

“You think so. Maybe it was the other way around, and she shot him.”

“I know that neighborhood well. Some of my father’s union boys lived there. I’m glad I didn’t. I had friends there when I was a teen. Got into a few fights there. You might say I learned to fight there. It was fun but sad because most of my friends never got past their teens. Died young.”

“Speaking of death, Stronach is late. If what he said is true, you are supposed to die tonight.”

“Bah. I’ve been supposed to die so many nights, I wish it would happen. Wouldn’t want to get Dermid after me, though. He might be the man to make it happen.”

Lena nodded, puffed on her joint. Dermid was Stronach’s first name, though most people called him by his surname. Stronach was in his early fifties and a life-long enforcer, first for unions, then for the Luciferians that drafted him. He didn’t come to town often or without a reason, and Andras did not want him in town while this big job was in flight. Dermid could be messy and brutal, so Andras had always viewed using him as a last resort.

“I wonder why they sent him in,” Lena said. “So they uncovered a rat in the organization. Why didn’t they just let me kill him, or let you do it, for that matter?”

“It’s the way they see things. They see us as already on a big job. They don’t want us to embrace any distractions. They would rather frustrate us. They want a man eliminated, and they like to send a pro from out of town to do stuff like that. Infiltrating and gaining control of international terrorists is a big deal for our people. Something we can use big time. They aren’t taking any chances on this job. Profits are in it, too. Terrorists don’t just kill people; we will use them to run opium, heroin, arms, and other stuff.”

“The idea of Billy getting information and trying to sell us out is not something I expected. Wonder why or even how?”

“Easy guess ... money. He’s into contract killings. I’ve known about it for a while. He never struck me as the Dermid type, who enjoys killing people. It’s money.”

“You’re lucky I don’t work for money. It has to be that rogue terrorist faction, Arab money, and they told us that was taken care of. But not quite, eh. They were still able to buy someone inside our organization to ice you. Not good.”

“If this job wasn’t so big, it would irk me. Fucking problems keep emerging. It’s supposed to be the police and the intelligence agencies that are the difficulty. Why are people in the terrorism business a bunch of backstabbing bastards? That rogue faction is proving to be like cockroaches. You think they are all dead, and then you find they’ve hired someone in your own organization to ice you.”

“Goes with the territory,” Lena said as a taxi pulled around from the front. “Not everyone does the clear thinking we do. Politics is a viral infection that manifests itself as betrayal. Terrorists and politicians, even fucking morons like Randy and Ali, who think murderous

political solutions will create a world they control ... well, they are doubly idiots. I've been in the killing business long enough to know that mindless killing just leads to more death. People like them are useful idiots. We use them, then we eliminate them, taking power for ourselves. A good thing, too. The idea of people like them being in control is quite the nightmare. A world in permanent chaos is much better than any social order they would establish. That Islam stuff of Randy and Ali doesn't even qualify as a religion. It is politics. Sharia Law is just a killing machine like communism or other bad politics. Their God is just like Big Brother, there on a poster watching the killing, approving of the bad politics, but not really existing."

"Dermid is at least a refreshing break from that sort of thinking. I mean, he is a ruthless killer, but mostly on contract. His main concern is the rituals and bizarre homosexual liaisons that he embeds in them."

"Killing is his job, and if death didn't lead to more death, it would have been a poor choice of occupation. Men like Dermid compartmentalize everything. A killing becomes a neat file locked inside its own parameters. There is no speculation, politics, or moral thinking tied to it. He shuts it away."

Dermid Stronach was already lighting a cigarette as he emerged from the cab. Big and all dressed in black, he seemed too big for the vehicle he was emerging from and a lot like a growing shadow. Tall, blocky, and square-shouldered, he blended with the darkness like a ghoul. He had the sort of chiseled features and head that made him seem less than fully formed. It was a look that some Scottish men had, and combined with his clothing, gave him the airs of a classic thug. His boots were black hiking boots, his pants were black boot-cut jeans, and his T-shirt was tight and black. Dermid's loose dark windbreaker was roomy enough to hide the weapons he was most certainly carrying. Weapons that in most cases were not needed, unless he decided to put on a show killing.

Dermid strode toward Andras. Andras stepped forward, and the two men embraced with Dermid patting Andras on the back so vigorously that he was glad the codeine pills were taking effect.

They separated, and Dermid nodded to Lena in grim acknowledgment. "So you know what this is about, and I know you don't need me. But they sent me. It's just the way it is. They want the road kept clear for the job you're doing. No distractions."

"Yeah, and they have eyes everywhere," Andras said. "I didn't suspect Billy of anything. Wouldn't have. Some very troublesome terrorists got to him. I can't figure out how."

"Not sure how they tagged him. But his every move is being followed. Let's go inside, have a chat, and some drinks. He won't be here for an hour."

"Fuck," Andras said. "I'm glad I haven't pissed off the head office. You, people, must either be psychic or have satellite surveillance, the way you get a read on a target."

"Can you confirm that the job is set up, so I can take the news back?"

"It's done; the bombs go in soon ... then boom. My job right now is staying out of sight."

Dermid took a long drag on his smoke and tossed it. He nodded to Lena and Andras. They strode toward the back entrance. "We keep a close watch on our people. When someone starts to stray like Billy, we know trouble is coming. Just a matter of when."

They went up carpeted stairs and entered the upper lounge, finding the place about half full. It was not a busy night. This was a large hall-style room. Though dim, the clever use of lamps and lanterns created pools of light where light was needed. Hard mosaic tan tiles gave the place a solid feel as they walked toward the far end. Most of the seating was along the two walls, and Andras knew everyone present. There were no guests allowed this week.

The far end contained the bar. One large dining table was off to the side of it, and it was always empty unless Andras and his group were present. The wall behind the table was a collage of images that blended to form a mural. The trident, in many forms, appeared throughout the mural, and other images were repeated in a long skull-and-bones scene of some hell. The painting was of a side cutaway view of a cavern, its entrance marked by a black inverted cross, its central area by the pentagram, and its end by a doorway leading into flames. Embellished in an artistic manner, the scene it depicted presented horrors that impressed the viewer rather than offending with tackiness or gore.

Dermid and Lena took chairs at the table, but Andras went to the bar. Rather than ask for service, he decided to serve a few drinks himself. He selected vodka for Lena, Southern Comfort, which was his before-dinner drink, and scotch whiskey for Dermid. Lena took hers on the rocks in a rock glass. He put a few drops of water in Dermid's two fingers of scotch, but he did not add ice or a lemon slice to the whiskey glass, lest he offend him. With the three drinks on a tray, he returned to the table, and they renewed the conversation.

Andras watched Dermid swallow his drink, thinking that dimmed lighting, which enhanced the looks of most people, especially women like Lena, simply added a Frankenstein effect to Dermid. Not that Dermid's looks offended Andras. In fact, he wished he had them instead of a deformed arm. Men like Dermid, brutish creatures with charm, always did well with women. At least they did when they were interested in women. Dermid's preference was more toward torturing young boys.

"Have you been in on this operation from the beginning?" Andras asked.

"Nearly. Call me the perimeter patrol. If anyone shows on the edges or has learned of the deal, I remove them from the picture. I know it is about power, gaining great power. The philosophy of it, well ... I haven't been educated regarding that. Now I know you, Andras. The philosophy of it would have been developed by you as much as the others."

Andras' thoughts were elsewhere as he briefly considered using Dermid to bump off Joe Holiday. He was, after all, on the perimeter. After a moment of thought, Andras nixed that idea. It would mean keeping Dermid in town while he hunted for Holiday. Taking a sip, he looked to Dermid. "You were saying?"

"The philosophy. I said you would be involved in it."

Andras nodded. "The philosophy is exciting. Let me explain it. We are doing something completely different. Terrorists in general are often dupes, idiots, or brainwashed kill

drones. Killing civilians never terrorizes the establishment; it terrorizes the public. Often, the establishment runs those sorts of operations to expand the police state with public support. What we are doing is terrorizing the establishment itself. We will begin with this initial attack, then unleash more strikes all over the world, hitting them at their centers of power. Now, why are we doing this? It is because the elite have control and have had it easy for far too long. No one escapes fear, terror, and the power of Lucifer. We will teach them that at any time their worthless lives might become forfeit. They have made the world a rotten apple full of corruption. They have made themselves weak, and when the weak fall, the strong rise. Now there is a business aspect as well. As we expand drug lines and operations in various nations, growing terrorism works to keep the police busy in other areas. They won't have time to go after drugs while they are in crisis due to terrorism."

Dermid's eyes showed deep thought, but not much conviction. "I like the business angle. It will work. But those sorts of elite people might not scare easily. They have armies at their disposal to fight terrorists."

Andras waved his hand as though waving armies off the table. "There are many old power brokers ... bankers and such. Yet there are also many who are young men and women. The young are inspired and awed by the occult. They love to fight, and they enjoy a small war, while the elders love money and what it can buy. When people get old, the magic fades, and they see life and death only. To them, life is the material world they want to hold on to. That is why we must shake the foundations. In a world becoming a world police state, it is vital that even the masters themselves live in terror of some portion of it. The best of their wealthy children, we will simply take, as we have always done, and they will be joined to our bloodline."

Dermid raised his eyebrow, but he didn't get a chance to reply. His phone beeped, and he took it from his pocket. "Billy will be pulling into the lot in a minute. I've had a tracker on his car for some time. I suppose I should go down and take care of him in the parking lot. We don't want a mess up here, do we?"

Andras wasn't averse to making a mess of Billy, but he knew that it wasn't allowed.

Lena's eyes were as sparkling as the ice in her glass, but the gleam was hard. She saw an immediate vision of how she would kill Billy, but would have to live with whatever brutal and dull plan Dermid's mind produced.

Dermid rose, and the lack of reply to his question took form as mutual understanding. A simple piece of business was to be completed, and he walked off as nonchalantly as a man leaving the table for a brief visit to the restroom.

As soon as his form disappeared through the door to the stairs, Andras came to life and stood up. "Come on, Lena. We can watch this from my new smoking room. I've got the mirrored glass in it now."

Lena's glum expression became a smile as she rose. She followed at Andras' heels as he went through a door behind the bar, around and through a storeroom, and then into his smoking lounge. There was no one present in the room as smokers from the upper section went down a narrow set of stairs and out an unmarked door at the far front left. Andras kept all outdoor activity at the front of the building. Even the narrow driveway to

the back had a "Keep Out" sign. Deliveries were on the north side. The setup meant that if anyone parked or appeared at the back and wasn't part of Andras' group, they would be immediately tagged as hostiles. The smoking room, being at the south end, had window views of the front, back and looking south where the highway turned uptown.

Lena went to the window, but Andras took time to slide the huge two-inch bolt on the door into place. It was a force of habit, not fear of people like Billy. It would serve as protection from any form of surprise. Bullets would not penetrate the door, and it would take men with a battering ram to knock it down. The smoking room had a pool table, and Andras walked around it as Lena pulled the decorative black curtains aside enough for them to look out.

This large window did not open, and even though the room was vented, it smelled of stale cigarette smoke. The initial fragrance always caused Andras to lose his urge to smoke, so in that sense, the room was a failure. He used it as a place to station sentries when certain activities were taking place, like drug or weapons sales. It would be easier to see things if more than just the neon lights lit the back, but lights wouldn't be added because there was an escape route through the ravine that could be used if police showed up at the front looking for someone.

The light was enough for them to see Dermid. He stood near the exit, smoking and waiting. As they watched, he pulled a handgun from an under-the-shoulder holster, put the cigarette in his mouth, and checked it over. They had a clear view of the gun; the glow of the Tritium night sights showed.

"Looks like a .45 caliber Springfield," Lena said. "No suppressor. He brings a cannon to shoot Billy."

"It's a compact gun with deadly force. He wants his target to go down and stay down. Maybe that is part of his success, at times, when he shoots people. He makes sure they won't get any chance of doing a return shot."

"What about noise?"

"He probably won't use it. We are at the end of the road, and with the ravine, anyone hearing a shot would think it came from the public housing on the other side. He shot a man in our lot before, so he knows about that."

"The cops are probably already over in the housing area, investigating the shooting we heard. They might know if a shot comes from here."

"It probably wasn't even reported. Maybe I should pop down and warn him."

Dermid continued to fuss with the gun. An ash grew on his cigarette, and then he pulled something from his coat, attached it to the end of his gun, then removed it and put it and the gun away."

"Cheap bastard," Lena said. "He made a suppressor out of a plastic bottle. And it fits on that gun. I would never have the patience to do that. His plan is awkward and stupid."

"It will have to work. Billy is here, there are the headlights at the side drive."

They watched as the car came out of the narrow drive between the building and the fence and rolled into the back parking lot. Dermid did not attempt to hide anywhere or set up an ambush. He remained near the exit door smoking. He'd put the gun away.

The drive-in did not give a direct view of the back entrance, and there was just enough light to see Billy at the wheel with his side window rolled down. He did not glance left, so he did not spot Dermid. He just rolled his Chevy across the lot and parked on the far side in the dark by the ravine. After he stopped, the interior lights came on, and they saw him fishing around in the front seat, then in the glove compartment, for something. They also saw that he was alone in the car.

Lena, who had been watching this with growing amazement, let out a small gasp. "Two complete assholes. One is out like it is a Sunday drive. Dermid could have stepped over and gotten him through the open window, but didn't do it. What's next, gay sex between the two?"

After much fussing in the car, Billy got out. It was only when he turned and started walking toward the entrance that he noticed Dermid. His behavior then became even more unprofessional. Tall and wiry, with a head of tousled red hair, Billy could be spotted from a kilometer away. His gate was especially noticeable, and when it suddenly became wary, Dermid knew that Billy had realized just why he happened to be out back.

The dim light accented Billy's face more than his body, and it was amazing how much Dermid and Billy looked alike, yet looked very different. Boots, jeans, and a windbreaker did not fit well on Billy, and with the wash of light on his face and red hair, he looked like a scarecrow that had come to life and walked over from the ravine. He came to a halt and put his hands up in a defensive posture, as though that would stop a bullet from Dermid. They could not hear his voice, though his expression revealed that he was pleading with Dermid, who did not have a gun out and had taken only one step forward out of the darkness.

Hands still out, Billy took a couple of steps back, and Andras watched with fascination at what would likely be a straightforward gun down. At least it would be if Dermid could hit the target while trying to shoot with his weird homemade silencer attached. He knew that Dermid would prefer a beat down. He would enjoy quietly breaking Billy's neck. However, within about a second, Billy would turn and run, and if he got down into the ravine and the darkness, he would be hard to track.

The second passed, and Billy turned to run; Dermid drew the Springfield and attached the suppressor with a smooth stroke. Dermid's fancy laser sights were of no use with the crappy silencer attached, and Dermid didn't make any determined aim. He simply raised the gun and fired. The one quick bullet blew a portion of Billy's head off.

Andras wheezed, drawing breath at the brutal simplicity of it and the fact that Dermid could do a head shot with such a rig. In the tinted light, it looked like a special effect from a movie, his head popping like a burst pie and fading into darkness as his body was thrown forward to the ground.

As the body landed, Andras' eyes shifted to Dermid and the evil smile forming slowly with a movement of his lips. The smile spread to the rest of his face. Then, in a flash,

Dermid's head exploded, and Andras ducked back from the glass, not knowing what could have possibly happened. He looked around for Lena. She wasn't there. He saw that the door bolt had been slid aside and that the door had been opened. She had slipped out so quietly he hadn't even noticed. And that meant ... he stepped back up to the glass and looked below. He saw her there, bending over Dermid's body, searching his coat pockets.

"What the fuck!" Andras shouted to no one, and he ran out of the room. Some of the people inside had heard the shot and were just rising from their tables. "Stay inside, everyone!" Andras yelled as he charged past them and thundered down the stairs.

At the bottom, he stepped out warily. It suddenly occurred to him that he might not be able to trust Lena. If so, he had walked right into her trap. He saw her standing there with something gleaming in her left hand ... something that looked familiar.

"What's going on? Why did you kill Dermid?" Andras sputtered.

"When I saw that Billy wasn't armed, I knew," Lena said.

"Knew what?"

She held out a small silver case, embossed with an image of the Baphomet. A case that was an exact match for the pill case Andras kept stored in a hidden compartment inside his smoking room.

"That's my pill case, my extra painkillers. What in the fuck is Dermid doing with it?"

Lean snapped it open. The case was filled with twenty-four round pearl-style pills.

Consternation and dim light created a mask of fear on Andras' face. "The prick was going to poison me. He was going to set it up so people would think Billy did it. That he iced him, but Billy somehow got me anyway, by poison."

"Yes. When I saw Billy's face, it suddenly hit me that no faction of terrorists from overseas would use him or even know about him. Dermid probably had a reason for killing him, but his key target was you. This smacks of a cleanup. Someone wanted you cleaned up, even before the job was done. But who?"

"I have a couple of enemies at the top. It was probably them, but I have to be sure. Smart idea. Get me to set up this operation and take future control for themselves. We wait. I will have a couple of targets for you once this deal is done."

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Joe rested on a bed of dry grass beneath a tarp, his small cache of surveillance equipment beside him. He'd set everything up to work outside of the vehicle, but it was now chilly, so he got back in the van. He felt stiff, cold, and sore. He lifted a bottle of Johnnie Walker scotch to his lips, swallowed, and chased it with spring water. Two shots were all he would allow. It would be enough to warm the muscles. After the second shot, he sat back and relaxed. He thought about his younger years and too much booze. Being with Josie on drunken adventures and in rehab had increased their

bond. Both of them remained as light drinkers, distinguishing them from other alcoholics who could be set on a downward spiral by a single drink.

He saw this current dead end as somewhat like rehab. Nervous, boring hours, wondering what the outcome would be. Would it be a bright future, or would everything end up shot to hell? The long, irritating surveillance had delivered one key piece of information. Their plans were to plant the bombs at the location the day before the explosions would take place. That gave Joe some leeway.

If the two terrorist idiots had planned to drive out in two vans with the bombs and to hit two locations on a suicide run, that would have made things difficult. Because they had disguised the bombs, the camouflage would be of no use if they weren't planting them in advance, but there was still the question of the attackers' stability. They matched the profile of terrorists who would do roadside bombs and suicide missions. Instability could mean a sudden change of plans if one of the madmen decided that blowing himself up immediately, along with a bunch of victims, was imperative. After thinking it over, he decided that it would not happen. Experience told him that once criminals had a plan set out, they could be as ruthless at sticking to it as they could be at killing people. Usually, the motive for staying with the plan was to avoid being caught and going to jail. Yet avoiding jail could hardly be a more short-term motive for terrorists. They would stick to the plan because it was their road to glory. The method of maximum effect they had chosen.

Strengthened by the booze, Joe got out and stretched his legs. He had field glasses with him. Stepping up to a break in the trees, he studied the factory. A few spotlights mounted by the demolition company illuminated parts of the exterior. Morning, afternoon, night, the place always gave Joe the feeling of watching a huge ghostly derelict that sucked the world around it into an alien vista. The place was a place of mind-numbing boredom, as if it had been decaying there forever. The factory was as barren and desolate as the souls of the terrorists in its bowels. Burr patches, thistles, flat patches of red clay, mounds of earth, and junk seemed almost like landscaping put in by some evil tramp that had once resided there. The foul odors of rot wafting over from it on sudden rises in the breeze and the spooky shadows the spotlights created were far more effective than the fence and Keep Out signs at scaring people off.

It had been silent for a while, with one of the men above and the other deep below, but things suddenly came to life with muffled voices. Joe could not hear what they were saying, but he knew they were now both in the upper area. He could see a faint light, and it suddenly went out. Some banging and footsteps followed, then something else attracted Joe's attention. A car had passed, and it was pulling down the road to the factory. Joe lifted the field glasses for a look. A white stretch limousine rolled in slowly and was nearly at the gate. It stopped, and the driver emerged to open the gate. Joe noted that it was Johan and that he was dressed casually in a fall jacket and loose beige trousers. Hair mussed, he walked as if he'd had a few drinks. He did not look to be in need of or to have any use for a stretch limousine, but more in need of a good night's rest.

Johan didn't have to enter with the vehicle because a circle of yellow light showed and Randy and Ali walked out of the darkness. That area wasn't lit by the spotlights and Joe

noticed a hidden exit there behind some scrub. They walked around a patch of tall, dead weeds and onto the broken road out. Joe got a close look at them as Johan played chauffeur, opening doors on either side for them to get in. Both men wore brown suits with dress shoes. The suits looked more summery than suitable for fall wear. Each man carried a shopping bag. Where they were going remained a mystery. Some extracurricular criminal activity could be in the works. Being extremists, they likely wouldn't enjoy the action at a casino or a concert. Perhaps they had found a reception or something political they wanted to attend. Perhaps it could be any of the things that come to mind, and the shopping bags contained fireworks to light things up.

The only way to find out was to tail them, so Joe hurried over to the van, started it, but didn't turn the lights on. His eyes were adjusted to darkness, but he drove out slowly, not wanting to sideswipe any trees. Stopping below road level and still well into the bushes, he waited for lights coming his way. Nothing showed, so he roared up and onto the road, turning left as he did. Johan was driving the other way. Joe saw the taillights disappearing up the road. Keeping his lights off, he hit the gas and picked up speed.

There was no other traffic at this dead end of town, and Joe stayed well back, following them for a kilometer with his lights off. A crossroads, Packard Road, lay ahead, and he could see a section of it to the north. It did have vehicles on it. Johan sped up and went over a rise, leaving Joe farther behind. Joe put his lights on, thinking there was only one other major turnoff besides Packard that was close. It was an express highway. If they passed that, they would be going rural. Joe assumed they would be taking the highway rather than Packard or the rural route.

He was wrong; Johan turned left onto Packard and moved along it at normal speed. Tailing someone properly really required two vehicles, and Johan could be unpredictable, switching from being an easy tail to a difficult nuisance. Packard Road was another of those lesser-known shortcuts over the top of the city, and since Johan knew every shortcut, it wasn't surprising that he was using it. It also made it hard to guess where he was going, because there were numerous off-road paths, most of them to places where nothing much would be happening at night.

There were now two vehicles widely spaced between Joe and Johan, and he lost visual contact but regained it as Johan took a long curve ahead. Johan had increased his speed dramatically and would soon be impossible to track. Joe hit the gas and sped ahead well over the speed limit. He passed the two vehicles and ended up going forty miles per hour over the limit. Packard converged with the highway ahead, running under the overpass. Joe spotted Johan hitting the on-ramp and followed him onto the highway, having to hit the gas hard to make sure other vehicles didn't create a large separation between him and the limo. Joe had never driven a stretch limousine, and he could see that Johan lacked experience, too. He'd had difficulty turning it, but on the highway, he continued speeding and drove the vehicle comfortably. Speeding while delivering two terrorists to a location was something only Johan would do, and judging by the lane change and signs ahead, that location was the airport.

Joe felt his scalp suddenly prickling. The airport? Had they chickened out and decided to flee, or were they going to plant some explosives at the airport? His tail was now close and he began to worry that Johan or his passengers would detect him. Traffic was

heavy, and many vehicles did pull in at the airport, but his van would stand out in that situation.

A turnoff to the closest hotel to the airport, a Marriott hotel, was ahead, and Joe followed Johan as he turned in to it. The Marriott would not be Joe's choice, as the airport strip had several beautiful hotels. Relatively small in comparison to most of the others, this Marriot was a simple chalk white structure with pastel highlights. It had some outdoor parking on three sides, underground parking, and a big silver shell awning over the front entrance. Terrorists likely wouldn't pick it for a target when there were bigger fish nearby so they were either booking rooms or picking someone up. Perhaps there was a kingpin of this operation, and he had just flown in.

Since Johan parked at the front, Joe had no choice but to cruise around to the back and hope they would not notice him. There was no way of telling if they did. There were a number of spaces at the rear, and only one was open. Joe zoomed into the spot fast, got out, and took a quick look around. Some of the lighting was out, and he thought he saw shadowy figures in one of the parked cars. Time was short, so he went to the south side, where a rock garden and patio, empty at this time of year, ran along the side to the front. The gate to it had a lock on it, so he jumped the metal fence and jogged ahead. This area was brightly lit by garden lights even when not in use. Joe knew that security could probably see him on camera. Another problem was that the garden and patio were part of a hotel restaurant called Azure Place, and some dinners still had a view out the sealed patio doors. A few guests were able to see him, but they were involved at their tables. He wouldn't be visible to staff unless a waiter happened to pass the doors and spot him.

Joe was able to move quickly, gain cover of a sculpted bush, and peek around the front. His speed allowed him to see Ali and Randy emerging from the vehicle. They weren't carrying the bags inside, so that meant they were not arriving to bomb the joint. Joe considered that they might have had a suite booked at the location since their arrival in the city. It was simply a matter of seeing if they stayed inside or came back out. Since Johan had parked but wasn't getting out, the most likely situation was that they were meeting someone or picking someone up.

Ali and Randy disappeared under the huge shell awning. Moments later, Johan emerged from the car and lit up a smoke. Joe took only the occasional peeks. He felt very uncomfortable. He hadn't done a solid check of the rear, just pulled in and hurried over. Trespassing in areas with security cameras, especially near the airport, was not a good practice. He could talk his way out of it, but there would be a camera record, and surveillance footage might be reviewed at some future date because of the two idiots who had just walked in.

Across from him to the south, there were stone steps that went up to an outdoor walkway between the hotel and the building next to it. Up there, he could watch the front and Johan, then hurry back down and around to the van to tail them when they left.

Johan's nervous habit led him to stroll over to the awning and entry walk while he smoked, then he turned to stroll back to the car. With Johan's back to him, Joe hurried over and went up the steps. He found no one on the walkway above and positioned himself where he could see over the brick wall. The wait was about twenty minutes; a

few taxis came and went. Four vehicles arrived and parked at the front and the side, and Joe did not like it because the engines and lights shut off, but no one emerged from the vehicles. From his angle, the glare prevented him from seeing who was inside, and he couldn't look close because he'd left his field glasses in the van.

Leaving wasn't an option; he felt pinned to the wall. He could not go down the stairs and cut through the garden to the van because two of the vehicles were positioned with a view of that area. None of the vehicles looked to be undercover cop cars. One was a BMW hatchback, the other a white Audi. The first two cars, the ones that had driven to the side, were Ford four-door vehicles, and one of them was about ten years old.

Seeing even one of the passengers of those cars would tip Joe as to who they were, but no one got out. If not cops, then what ... other terrorists? It was possible, though remote, that Randy and Ali had enemies who had tracked them here. More likely, they were connected with the person they were meeting in the hotel.

Fifteen slow minutes ticked by, then Randy and Ali appeared under the awning. For the first second, Joe thought they were alone, and then he realized that the three women walking behind them were with them. Joe could see them clearly. The entry was brightly lit. The three women wore pale blue hijabs that wrapped around the neck and fell over their breasts, just above the waist. They left the face fully open. Two of the women were light-skinned, and one was black. The woman in the center wore stylish dark sunglasses even though it was nighttime. They wore eye makeup but no noticeable lip gloss. Their dresses were black and, though Islamic, were of an expensive style and identical, featuring belts at the waist and buttons. The fabric looked to be so heavy that no fall coat would be required with such a dress. Joe wondered how they meshed with the scheme of things. Muslims, yes, but too classy to belong to the barbarians picking them up. Obviously, they had just arrived from the airport and were being picked up and delivered somewhere, which was why they were in a limousine. It also seemed clear that they would discard the Islamic style of clothing and wear the items Johan had bought at Super Venus. They were part of the terrorist plan.

Joe's eyes flicked to the two suspicious vehicles he could see. The doors were opening; all of the doors, and armed men were getting out. He was about to pull back completely out of sight when he felt the muzzle of a handgun planted in his back and heard a coarse voice say, "You move, Holiday, and I'll shoot."

The voice belonged to Jason Kufner, and it caused Joe's heart to sink even though the scene he was watching was exciting. The armed men rushed over from the cars. Eight more men and women came from both sides of the hotel, including the garden Joe had used. The women, Ali, Randy, and Johan, were surrounded by an approaching circle of security people. None of them wore uniforms. The men wore ill-fitting stonewashed jeans topped with army-green vests over long-sleeved shirts. The women's clothing was a better fit, and they wore baseball caps. Both women had ponytails behind their caps. The team leader shouted, "Don't move! Put your hands up!"

Ali, Randy, and the three women simply stopped calmly and put their hands up. Two of the security men wore goggles and green helmets as though expecting a chemical attack. They were the two who ran toward Johan. He dropped his cigarette and then stepped back so fast with his hands up that he fell backward and landed on his rear.

What surprised Joe even more than a gun in the back and the sudden raid and arrests was the way Randy and Ali simply obeyed, as if they were in no danger at all. It didn't make much sense, but Joe didn't get time to think about it. Kufner said, "They're RCMP, undercover assholes. You're in deep shit, Holiday." Then a hand went to his left shoulder as the gun slammed the right side of his head, and he went down and out.

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Joe had grown accustomed to interrogation rooms, so when he woke in one, it was just another day. He was lying on a gym mat on a hard, white-tiled floor. He had a splitting headache, which was not surprising considering the nasty lump and matted hair on the right side of his head. Memory returned quickly, and he sat up and looked around. The room appeared to be a combination of a prison cell and an interrogation room. It had a rectangular window on the far side, so he stepped over to it. Beyond the unbreakable glass was an identical room to the one he was in, with a similar sleeping mat in the corner, a white-tiled floor, and a mahogany desk in the center. The walls were papered with a buff brown, but he was certain they were hard as stone or steel. Lighting came from one caged bank of fluorescent tubes on the ceiling above the table.

With his right hand holding his head, Joe walked over to the table and slapped his left hand down hard on it, finding the mahogany appearance to be an illusion. It was hard metal and bolted to the floor. He pulled out one of the chairs, sat, and stared across at the door. There was no interior handle, and it had some form of padding, like it had been bought at a discount from a mental institution and used in the cell here, at what had to be a black site. Joe tried thinking about what had happened, but his head hurt too much. Putting his head on his hands, he fell asleep, waking when he heard the sound of the door opening.

The person entering was Special Agent Jason Kufner. He wore a predatory grin and Ray-Ban glasses. Joe felt that the glasses were appropriate as the overhead lighting hurt his eyes. Feeling a flash of anger, Joe stood up, knocking the chair back. Dizziness hit him immediately, and he put one hand on the table to steady himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught some motion in the next room. Velisa Newport walked across it and sat at the table. She wore a gray pantsuit like a female executive, and acted like one as she put down a tablet computer and took out a stylus to write on it. She did not even bother to glance at Joe.

"Easy, boy, easy," Kufner said mockingly, as though speaking to a dog. "You'll find it a bit better to sit down. We gave you a little something to help with that headache of yours. Something that will also help you tell the truth."

Joe sat down. He felt like giving up. He did feel tranquilized, but felt no urge to tell the truth.

Kufner pulled out the other chair and sat down. He gave Joe his most serious look. "You can end this quickly or let it drag on for weeks. But look, I don't have time for you, so if you are smart, you will answer my question."

"You mean you only have one question?"

"It is all I need. I'm sure you remember the hotel. You pulled in around back, in quite a hurry to say the least. You're also a rather sloppy detective because you didn't even notice us parked there. Instead, you trespassed over the garden and set up surveillance on the same people we were watching. Holiday, we told you to stay out of federal cases. We told you what we would do to you. Now state for the record, why were you there?"

"I can tell you straight up. I have a corporate client, a company president named Gerard Cusak. He hired me to tail his personnel director, a man named Johan Dietrich. He is the man who was driving the limousine at the time of your raid. If you have a slip of paper, I can give you Mr. Cusak's phone number and company address so you can check it out."

Kufner sighed, took off his glasses, and wiped his brow. His expression said that he did not believe a word Joe said. Then Joe saw him glancing past him to the window. The word "what" came silently to his lips as he continued to look over at Newport. He shook his head again in disbelief.

"It's not truth serum," Joe said. "This room has some form of lie detection equipment. Checks the stress of my voice."

"Yes, and this equipment is far beyond your Boy Scout budget, Holiday. It is also very accurate, and though I do not want to believe it, it says you are telling the truth. Give me that phone number and name. I'm going to check it out."

The wait was two hours. During that time, Newport left the adjoining room. A semi-conscious prisoner was carried into it by two thuggish undercover men and dropped on the mat. This prisoner had a shaved head and many tattoos on a muscular body, which was the look of a white supremacist. When Kufner returned, his expression was stony. "You're lucky, Holiday. Your story checks out. You're not getting out because I want it to happen. I made a mistake knocking you out. A mistake because when I dragged you back to the van, the RCMP documented your arrest. The paper on your arrest is the only thing saving you from being in here indefinitely."

"I don't even know what this is about. I saw the undercovers make a big and bold arrest. Who were those women? Who are those men Johan was chauffeuring around town? What are they charged with?"

Kufner put on a severe frown and stared at Joe like he was staring at an idiot. He tapped his glasses on the table as if he was fed up. "It's a federal case. You were told to stay out of federal cases. You know that, yet you keep asking questions. I am not obligated to tell you anything, but it is nothing you can go to the media about because they already know. Here's what you can tell your client. You can tell Mr. Cusak that you cracked the biggest case of your gumshoe career. You caught his personnel man, Johan Dietrich, moonlighting as an Uber driver."

"That's it, that's all he did?"

"What can I say, Holiday. He's an idiot like you are. He's divorced, so I guess you can't get the usual dirt on him. I suppose you thought you had something because that arrest looked big. It wasn't, but when the RCMP undercover guys get involved, they always overplay it. The situation is completely under our control. One of the women you saw

exiting the hotel, the black one, is on an Interpol wanted list. She used an alias and the other four Muslim visitors as dupes so she could get into the country. We have her in custody. The Muslim Brotherhood got the others set free, including your idiot friend, Johan. I would have preferred to sweat them for a few days, but that is how it goes when Dudley Do-Right from the RCMP runs a sting.”

“I know nothing about that woman you arrested. I just sort of stumbled into that arrest scene.”

“Yeah, and this time you are going to stumble back to the desk job. Unless you want to be charged for stalking people, I suggest you keep yourself off the streets. Now go back to your mat, rest, and wait. You’ll be released whenever the boys at the front are in the mood for it.”

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What Jason Kufner called release was closer to being mugged, but even that was better than the five long hours he waited after Kufner left the room. Joe figured he wouldn’t do well as a prisoner. Stakeouts he could do because there was always hope of a break and some action. Being locked in a cell very quickly brought on feelings of depression and hopelessness. He thought about Josie, about calling her and telling her what was going on. Then he realized that being hit on the head had made him stupid. Josie would be furious. She would go ballistic and start lecturing him about the stupid cases he took. It would open the same old cracks in their relationship. Like most successful women, full security for her meant having her man leashed and certified as a puppy dog. They all fell into the pattern of wanting a man in bed and a wuss for everything else. Calling anyone would probably not be wise either. Joe was quite sure that today’s intelligence agencies could break most encryption, and they were definitely watching him now.

When the hopeless feeling ended, it was with a hissing sound. Gas poured into the room through a vent. Joe hurried over and began pounding the padded door. His fists made no sound, and he stepped back, having suddenly realized why the padding was there. He shouted, heard an echo, and knew his effort was futile. They obviously knew they were gassing him and were not coming to his aid. He held his breath until he could hold it no longer, then the gas slowly got to him, and he sat down on the mat and passed out.

A pleasant dream of floating on pillows of air filled his mind, and the dream seemed to go on forever. It ended with a flash of lightning as he felt something ripped from his head. He woke fully, and his eyes slowly adjusted. There were no more pillows of air as they had been replaced by a bumpy ride in the back of a car. He was in the middle with a man on either side of him, and the fragrance was no longer of gas but of man’s sweat and cheap cologne. Some of the bad odor was his own, as he needed a shower.

Joe felt drained and like he might throw up at any moment, but he didn’t get that chance, at least not in the car. It took a hard right and cruised to a stop. The rear doors opened, and the two men on either side of him got out. He tried to do the same, but the world swam in front of his eyes, and he tumbled on his side on the seat. Moments later, strong arms pulled him, supporting him on both sides as they walked him forward. One

of the men said, "Time for a picnic, Holiday." He was so groggy he wondered what it meant as they threw him forward to tumble and roll in hard gravel. He choked on some dust, and he heard the car drive off as he sat up.

The day was sunny, warm for fall, and it was near noon. Joe's vision was blurred, but he could see as though through a fogged lens. He was in a small gravel drive-in next to a strip of parkland backed by a low hill. The air was fresh; he estimated that they had dumped him somewhere on the city outskirts. Joe got up, staggered three steps, and went down on his knees. He could not walk. They had given him something that killed the brain's ability to coordinate his legs. His arms worked fine, and he opened and closed his hands and found them okay. He looked around, hoping to see someone, but there was no one. The grassy area had two picnic tables and a bench. He made his way over three steps at a time. He would go to his knees, get back up, and start again. He reached the bench, sat, and tried to think. Images of Johan, the terrorists, the women in hijabs, Kufner, and undercover cops spun in an evil collage. Something wasn't right about the vision. Perhaps it was that they were all part of the same wicked message. He thought about it, had a strange idea, and then passed out.

He woke with the burning sun on him and pain in his legs. Sitting up, he put his legs out. The muscles were moving in spasms, his left leg cramped up so tight he let out a yelp of pain. Getting up, he hopped about on his right foot as he tried to unlock his left leg. Five minutes later, he paced back and forth on the grass. His legs were now working, and he hoped the cramps would not return.

Joe got out of the sun and sat at one of the picnic tables. A jogger appeared, coming down a wood-chip trail from the hill. Joe waved him over. He was an elderly man with silver hair and good shape, carrying a rolled-up newspaper. He resembled a judge Joe knew, and he stayed a pace away from Joe, eyeing him suspiciously. The jogger waited a few moments, then removed his earbuds.

"I'm not a mugger," Joe said. "A long night drinking with friends messed me up. We parked here, but they drove off without me. Where exactly is this park?"

"You're in the north end. The reservoir lands are on the other side of the hill."

"Can you call me a cab? Call Diamond; say it is for Joe Holiday. They know me. I have an arrangement with them."

"Sure," he said. He took out his cell phone and put his paper on the picnic table. The instructions the man gave the dispatcher were complex. Joe picked up the paper, and he wasn't interested in the headline, but in the date. It showed that he'd been incarcerated overnight. Johan and his terrorist pals hadn't even been in that long. It sure didn't add up. Why would anyone assume the lot of them were dupes, used by the one woman wanted by Interpol? That intelligence-agency computers would spit out clean paper on Randy and Ali made no sense either. Men like that would have long, documented histories.

A beat-up cab showed up half an hour later, and a bald cabby named Will drove Joe to the Parkway Hotel. Will exuded odors of musk and had the gloomy personality of the silent chauffeur. Joe's rough condition did not arouse his interest, and he had the radio

tuned to a talk radio channel whose host was angrily denouncing the evil cabal ruling the current parliament. The Parkway Hotel was near a strip mall, so Joe booked a room and then went out to pick up some fresh clothes and a throwaway phone.

He had decided not to end the investigation, which meant not returning home, where some form of surveillance would likely be set up by Kufner, though it was possible the local cops were still monitoring him. Walking down the polished mall aisle, he felt rough and sore. He could have taken a shower, but without fresh clothes, there was no point.

Pausing at a bench across from an outlet called The Ice Cream Bar, he watched people pass as he called Cusac and updated him on the case. Joe borrowed Jason Kufner's odd story about Johan moonlighting as an Uber driver. While explaining it to Cusac, it hit home on just how ridiculous the story was. He told Cusac he had to drop the case, which drew questions.

Cusac had an obvious concern in his voice. "Joe ... driving for Uber, with his high salary? He picks up a criminal female at the airport? None of this makes sense. What about his strange behavior on the job? Why is everything about Johan Dietrich suddenly from a Strange Tales comic book?"

"He is eccentric and does things in unusual ways. You will have to decide whether to continue his employment based on that. If you want someone more conventional on the job, then find a reason to fire him. His poor attendance is reason enough. He has some right to privacy, so unless you hear of him being involved in something criminal, I have to leave him alone for now."

"Okay. I'll keep that in mind."

Joe knew that Kufner and Newport probably had Cusac's phone tapped. If not that, then they would have set things up so that Cusac would inform them when he called. They would want to know exactly what he said. Joe made a second brief call to Sanderson and found that the van had been returned to him by a gruff, overweight spook named Stillson. Joe's duffel bag and other items were still in the back.

Sanderson's voice was edgy. "This Stillson chap threatened me. I took it in stride, played along."

"What exactly did he want to know?"

"Why I lent you a van, and why you needed one. I told him that all I knew was that you were on one of your standard cases, following some employee for a boss. He seemed satisfied with that answer, as if he expected it. But ... he warned me not to be found helping you any time soon."

"I need another van."

"No way. If they see me with you or you in one of my vans, they'll be on me."

"They aren't going to see me or you. It is possible they are watching you, but not likely. If so, then Stillson will be somewhere nearby. He won't be following you. He'll follow me when I pick up my stuff. They might even have your office phone bugged. They won't know about the secure cell you use because if they do, then your security sucks."

“Believe me, no spook has my personal phone tapped. Providing secure phones is one of my specialties. You know that.”

“I do, and that is why I called. I want you to call a cabby I know. Have him pick up a van from your place. Not from the lot but the one I saw in your garage that still has the Lockwood Fire logo on it.”

“I just bought that van. You’re going to wreck it before I even have it painted.”

“No worries. I’ll pay. Let me have it, and you won’t see me for a while. I’ll change the plates on it once I have it.”

“Not seeing you for a while is an incentive. I know the spooks want to rattle me, but there is no law against loaning someone a van, no matter what they say. Even if they did find out, they couldn’t do anything about it. I mean, so long as you don’t do anything illegal. You aren’t planning to break anything other than traffic laws, are you?”

“No, and they won’t find out about me having the van either.”

Okay, give me the number of your friend.”

Joe gave him the number, then a thought came to mind. “Do you know anything about a company named Wizard Waste Management?”

“I do. It’s odd that you would bring them up. Some of my salespeople talk about them from time to time. We have sold them security equipment. I was never involved. They aren’t a big contract. The tales about them are almost like Bigfoot or aliens. Weird people, a creepy cult. A few of them are like bikers. They have a meeting place at the top of a Greek Restaurant called the Poseidon.”

“I’ve passed that restaurant before. I was at the recycling yard. The employees there had tattoos like occult stuff.”

“Yeah, anyway ... talk from the salespeople is mostly about being afraid to meet them or personally deliver items. Those people are scary. I heard there is a big gang of them, like about thirty or so super-weird people. Speculation about what they do ranges from ritual killings to calling up demons. One of my salesmen is very religious. They scare the crap out of him. Despite the talk and fear of them, my people always came back after a sale, so I figured it was just unjustified fear. I mean, most people are afraid of those sorts of people. You should be, too. Why are you investigating them?”

“The employee I was investigating had a tenuous connection to them.”

“Stay away from them. They are not the sort of deal a lone man should be prying into.”

Sanderson hung up. Prying deeper into the Satanist cult wasn’t on Joe’s mind. The regular body of them wouldn’t be in the loop regarding the terrorism deal. It was the three boss devils that had Joe’s attention. Perhaps those three felt that terrorism was some new fire they wanted to play with.

He decided to move forward. As well as not being able to tap Sanderson’s cell phone, any interested parties would not know that Joe kept some supplies in a storage locker on the north side of town. Once he had the van, he would go there.

One good thing about being in need of a shower and being a big guy looking about two days rough was that it let him eat lunch at a mall food court without being crowded by the public. He ate his chicken dinner slowly, with the skylight above leaving him in a circle of sunlight. Many people came his way carrying trays of food, and all of them avoided him and his large table. Two mall security guards passed by, scrutinized him, and sized him up as too big and too quiet to harass without reason. As he sipped his super-size cola, he again wondered how it was that Johan and his terrorists could reek of dynamite, gun oil, and extremism and be as clean as starched white shirts as far as cops and intelligence agents were concerned. Perhaps the wizard at Wizard Waste Management knew that and why snake-tattooed Satanists were suddenly interested in terrorism. He calculated that Johan would be jittery after being arrested, but none of the others would be, and the plan would still be in the works. Randy and Ali would be back at the factory now because the bombs were there, and as far as they knew, the hideout hadn't been compromised. So it was back to square one. He would stake out the factory again. It was highly possible that the arrest had led to caution and delay. They wouldn't have moved the bombs yet, not until they were sure they weren't being tracked.

Two blond hookers came on to him as he walked under the canopied walk into the Parkway. One hooked her arm around his to enter with him, but he didn't need company, so he halted, grinned, and told her maybe later. He crossed the lobby, figuring that hookers were brighter than the public. In the mall, people took him for a bum, but the two hookers weren't fooled. They saw the shopping bags he carried and had a better eye for who might have money yet look a little rough. In his room, he took a long shower, first hot and then cold. The new clothes were for the street and for driving: blue jeans, a pair of Reebok shoes, a blue plaid button-down shirt, and a Ralph Lauren windbreaker. He had a duffel bag like the first in storage with a couple of disguises in it if he needed them. After checking himself over in the mirror, he took a couple of painkillers to kill the sore muscles. He still felt spooked, and even though he was certain no one had followed him to the hotel, he went to the window and looked out at the street for ten solid minutes. He saw nothing suspicious, but he did see his new van, with the Lockwood Fire logo, pulling up at the curb just down from the hotel. The driver got out, and Joe recognized him as Mitch. Mitch had shaggy red hair, a full beard, jeans torn at the knees, and his arrival meant the situation was clear. Mitch was the driver who delivered for Joe, and a switch would be a tip-off that something had gone wrong. Joe watched Mitch walk north and disappear around the corner. Mitch would take a cab back.

Joe took the stairwell down, and it wasn't clean but littered with cigarette butts. He went out a side fire escape and checked the front walk from the shadows of the alleyway. Wind shook the nearby maple trees, and dappled sunlight played over a few men near the front canopy. They were of the seedy sort that belonged to the neighboring drug-infested streets, and they failed to notice Joe as he walked out and went the other way to pick up the van. Cops and spooks were the characters he was trying to avoid, and in this area, there would be cops at night but not likely any spooks, as there was no one important enough to be under that sort of surveillance.

Joe got in, as the door was not locked. He took the keys from under the seat and then went around and opened the back. It was empty. A ten-kilometer drive took him to

Spaces Self Storage. He pulled into the drive, stopped in front of a bright-red corrugated roll-up door, and got out. He walked under the huge SELF STORAGE sign and past a rock garden to the entrance. Spaces Self Storage was quite large; a moving van could be driven through the roll-up door and down a concrete driveway between the storage lockers to load right there, but all Joe wanted was access to a small storage area. He keyed a code and entered a small aisle of lockers. The reek of industrial soap irritated his nostrils as he walked down to locker 54. He opened it, did a quick check of the contents, picked up his bag, and left. The clothes he had on, he would wear on the drive over to the factory, and then he might change to something more appropriate.

Most of that drive was an uneventful, scenic ride through dusty back streets. The van handled nicely, and he found himself thinking that actually being the Lockwood Fireman on call would be better than being Joe Holiday on this messed-up case. This case was reminiscent of other cases he had handled in the past. He seemed to be driving down a blind alley to an unknown destination. It was like an impending nuclear war where a big bang was the outcome that might be impossible to prevent. Control in this case belonged to a group of people who could properly be described as criminally insane, and whether they thought they were serving Allah or Satan didn't make much difference. "Control," he muttered the word three times as he drove through the bushes to his stakeout location. He had to find a way to put himself in control of this deal. If not impossible, it wouldn't be easy. For the present, he was in the back seat waiting to see where the terrorist driver would go.

The day was cooling, though the sun was out. Joe got out of the vehicle and found the cold invigorating. He walked over to a tarp partially covered with branches. He cleared away the debris and noted that his small catch of surveillance equipment was still present. Fortunately, it had not been in the van when he followed the men to the airport. Joe needed a few minutes just to get something working. His first need was to verify that they had returned to the derelict factory. Attempting to go right in on foot was not in his plans, at least not yet.

Joe carried the equipment to the back of the van for setup, and while he worked on that, some related phone calls were taking place.

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Andras answered a call on his secure cell phone. He recognized the smooth voice immediately, the Saudi contact. "Could you speak up?" the caller said. "This connection has a terrible hissing noise."

"Ah, the noise ... I'm in the shower."

"You take phone calls in the shower?"

"Sure. It is one of the great things about this phone. I never miss a call. It is waterproof, and you can use it in the shower."

"Really. My message is brief. We got your alert about the one woman being seized. Is the plan moving ahead as you said?"

"It is. There are no other obstacles. Prepare to hear about a big boom."

“Good. We’ve decided to simplify it. The big boom is enough. Who sets off the bombs?”

“That hasn’t changed. Randy and Ali will be at the factory. They’ll make the call that ignites everything. They demanded that right from the beginning. I will be at a location where I can see it. Those two then go on their suicide run to a shopping mall and die as martyrs.”

“Okay, let them make the detonation call. We owe them that much. However, their method of death has changed. After the call is made, have your people kill them immediately. It is better that way. Things are shaky now. We can’t chance one of them being captured alive. We’ll make up for the loss on the next operation.”

“It will be done. I will send someone in to erase them. I agree that the bombs are enough. On thinking it over, it occurred to me that a shopping mall run would be a distraction from the main event.”

“Oh, one other thing. That dupe you are using, named Johan. Don’t forget to erase him.”

Andras laughed. “An elephant never forgets, and with him, he is already dead but just doesn’t know it yet.”

The phone went dead, and Andras turned the hot water on full and began to sing a song in Greek. Knowing that killing Randy and Ali had become an official part of the job was cause for happiness. Thoughts of what would happen to Johan created even more joy. He already had explosives planted that would burn the factory, and after Lena had erased his star terrorists, they would burn in it.

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A phone rang in the property manager’s office at the Liberty Import Complex. A woman answered and remained silent for a moment or two when the caller said, “Hello, Aamira.”

Aamira caught her breath and then said, “Why are you calling me here? And why aren’t you using my Western name, Marnia?”

“Relax; the cell phone you are using was stolen from a woman who won’t even notice it missing for a week.”

“Yes. I was told that, but taking chances isn’t part of the plan.”

“This is the last call. Your assistant. You are to dispatch her to the grave before you leave the complex. Store her body there. It will be buried in the rubble. You are to arrive at the factory hideout just before the explosion. Make sure the Liberty bomb is detonated, and erase Randy and Ali. Do that and wait. Andras may also send a killer there for Randy and Ali. Kill that person, too. Kill anyone with that person, even if it is Andras.”

“Sounds like fun. Consider it done.”

“Plan for more fun than usual.”

Marnia grinned broadly; the phone went dead.

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The second last call went to a man parked in the shadows of an alleyway not far from the Liberty Import Complex. This man was blowing cigar smoke out the window and sighing with satisfaction. He watched two security guards pass. They were from the firm sent in for the days of preparation before the official demolition. If they were lucky, they wouldn't be on shift to be buried in the unofficial demolition. More smoke, in the form of three rings, emerged from the open side window and drifted up the scarred brick wall. The frivolous, dissipating vapors revealed how little this man feared security guards. He viewed them as so useless that he could kill them both in an instant. Like most people, they were simply too stupid to care about. Life was about bigger things than them, like excellent plans and schemes, and power to be obtained only by the worthy. He felt the whole deal was going to close nicely, and he was at peace about it. The explosion was all but done, and the second explosion would be one of news and opinion. There would be grief and anger, fear and the need for revenge against the terrorist enemy. Shaping that ongoing narrative would be an even bigger part of the job.

His cell phone rang. "Andras and his local confidants," the voice said.

"Yeah, what about them?"

"We won't need them when the job is done?"

"So, you've finally come to your senses."

"We discovered some very troubling things about him and his organization."

"My info is that there are crocodiles more trustworthy than his outfit."

A dry laugh. "Andras will receive a call at the time of the Liberty explosion. He will head to the factory immediately. One of our women, Marnia, will ice our two star terrorists. They should be dead before Andras gets there. The other woman who arrived in the country with Marnia will be found in the rubble of the Liberty. Marnia will wait at the factory to finish off a killer or killers Andras will send to silence our terrorists. You will arrive and take out Marnia, or whoever it is that happens to survive. Be careful. She is quite dangerous. Andras and his people are deadly, too. If Andras is there and has survived, you need to be prepared. Andras and anyone with him must be erased as a security measure. Do it your own way as the circumstances guide you. If there are any other loose ends we don't know about, fix them too. You are the undertaker and in charge of the final cleanup. Burn the factory."

"There is one local, a private investigator. He doesn't know anything concrete, but he might get smart ideas after the blast and stir up trouble. He's gone off the grid. As soon as he surfaces, I will finish him."

"That's great. Do it. We now have this set up perfectly." The line went dead."

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Chapter Eight: The Delivery Men

Ali powered down the phone and grinned like an idiot savant as he looked through a crack in the greasy sheet of window plastic. Wind scattered dust and litter over the factory grounds below. Another desolate day. He heard Randy's heavy footsteps hurrying up the stairs. The big man burst into view, looking bearlike in the wash of salty light and glare from the larger segment of windows tacked over with filmed Mylar sheets. He saw the shiny new cellphone in Ali's hand and growled, throwing the three pairs of overalls he was carrying to the warped floorboards. "Hey! The only phone we are supposed to be using now is for detonation. Where did you get that one?"

"I've had it from the beginning."

"Damn you! Talking to who?"

"Messengers from the Caliphate. You have always been so loyal that you forget that other people are treacherous. Heed the holy book verse 5:5:1 when it warns that believers do not take Jews and Christians as partners."

"I knew you would see it that way."

"The direct line with the Caliphate has been so they can be sure the operation is going as planned. They would never trust westernized Muslims like Jalal. We are ourselves in violation of Islamic law for partnering with the people here."

"I see," Randy said. A calculating expression formed on his face. "I mean, I see why they wouldn't trust anyone here. However, we are not in violation, and those people are not our partners. We are using them as tools. We only pretend to be partners the way all Muslims do with others. I don't like these risks you take, but since it is already done, what is the final word from the Caliphate?"

"Another video is the final word. I saved it so we can watch it together. It honors us as martyrs, and the entire Islamic world will see it. But only after the bombing."

"Really. I must see it."

"Let us watch and contemplate," Ali said cheerfully. "But on a bigger screen than this one." Reaching over, he pulled a battered ten-inch tablet from a canvas bag on the table. Grinning as Randy frowned at the sight of the contraband, Ali went to work, transferring the video to the tablet, then slid it over to a darker part of the room. After leaning the tablet against a brick sitting on a copy of the Quran, he hit play, and they stood back, arms crossed, and watched.

The scene opened with a shot of the cover of an embellished holy book, then faded out. It brightened on a battered Ford pickup truck pulling up in a harsh desert area. Two al Qaeda commanders emerged from the truck's cab. They wore the signature black face and head covering that provided both protection and anonymity in the desert battlegrounds. One carried an AK-47, the other a handgun. Three other fighters appeared in the dust of the background, and the movie's producer panned his cell phone camera and followed them as they went to the back of the truck and unloaded three prisoners, all male, wearing orange overalls. The hands of the three men were cuffed at the front with plastic ties, and they showed obvious signs of abuse. Their faces were dust-streaked, and their hair shaggy and mussed. As their eyes were blank and

their faces revealed no expression, their torture had no doubt been long and draining. They appeared to be of Arab background.

The scene went through jumpy phases until it settled on the three men, who were forced to kneel in the sand by a ditch. A masked executioner moved menacingly behind them. Another man began speaking, and at that point, either the video or Ali's tablet failed, as the words were mostly garbled, out-of-sync nonsense coming through the tinny tablet speakers.

"What is he saying?" Ali said, with a perturbed expression on his face.

"Shush," Randy replied, cocking his ear and listening until the brief speech ended. "I made out honor, infidels. Yes, I've attended similar executions. They are honoring us by beheading three Coptic Christians. Three to highlight their blasphemous belief that God is three, when there is only one Allah. Pronounced guilty, the sword must be used to destroy them for this form of blasphemy."

The camera shifted again for no apparent reason, then came back to the scene. The three men were kneeling with their heads down, and the third man had been moved a few feet to the side. The curve of a sulthan sword gleamed as the executioner held it high. He positioned himself, and the sword flashed. It proved to be razor sharp. It severed the victim's head clean from his body, and the body fell in the sand.

The other two prisoners came up off their knees, stumbling as they tried to flee, but they had no hope of escape. The camera went back to the executioner towering over the corpse in the sand, then switched back to the two prisoners being roughly forced back for their own executions.

Ali's mouth had been open throughout this scene. It had inspired him to new heights in his perverse interpretations of Islam. He spoke in reverent tones as the killing continued. "Here we see the religion of peace at work. The blasphemer bleeds peacefully on the ground. His soul shall be dragged through the fires of hell. But to us it is peace. When we die, we will be by the gardens and rivers, in the presence of the holy one, honored for such wonderful deeds."

Randy also became filled with inspiration, perhaps of the divinely evil variety. "Yes, honored ones in the garden of bliss," Randy said. "It is not we alone who are honored. Allah, the Prophet, and all believers are honored as many scriptures are obeyed. Especially Surah Al-Baqarah verse 2:191, which commands us to slay the unbelievers wherever they are found."

"Yes, and do not forget Quran verse 8:12, which commands us to strike unbelievers on the neck."

"True, and there are methods sanctioned other than beheading. Keep in mind Surah Al-Hajj 22:19 and the command to punish the unbelievers with garments of fire and scalding water."

Ali nodded in approval and sighed. Filled with the bliss of the Prophet, both men took another step back and again crossed their arms, prepared to watch the remaining two executions. However, that didn't happen. Bliss developed a glitch. Colored lines burst across the tablet's screen, and the image turned to snow.

“Bastard!” Ali shouted. He picked up the tablet, found that it had died, and threw it against the far wall.

Randy turned to the window. “Here comes Johan with the truck. It’s time for the delivery.”

“When we get back, we will clean this up. The garbage and anything we won’t need, we will bury.”

Randy was already stripping off his clothes to put on the overalls and work shirt. Ali did the same, and they were finished changing by the time Johan came up the stairs. Johan’s expression was gloomy, downcast. Recent events had not cheered him. For the first time in his life, he’d had suicidal thoughts. The fact that Ali and Randy were grinning did not help much. It made the situation seem absurd.

“How do we look?” Randy asked.

Johan studied them carefully: the work shirts and overalls with the Tropic Air HVAC logo. “The work boots look too new, but other than that, you look exactly like two repair guys.”

“Good,” Randy said. “He took the remaining set of clothing from the table and tossed it to Johan. “Put these clothes on.”

Johan caught the clothing and wrinkled his nose. “But I’m only the driver. I shouldn’t go in. These overalls smell like filth. I can’t wear them.”

“This is not a game,” Randy said, his widening eyes and serious tone indicating that he would broach no resistance. “You will wear them. We must look exactly like what we are supposed to be. We have the women covering for us, but we want to look realistic for the security cameras.”

“If we are HVAC men, why are we bringing in generators?”

Ali answered. “The cover is that there will be a pre-demolition period where the main power is disconnected. The generators are being stored for use then.”

“Fuck!” Johan suddenly exclaimed. “That place is going to be blown up anyway. Why is it your target?”

Ali’s expression remained cold, his eyes hard and probing, as if studying an insolent and stupid dog. “It is very large, has so many offices, and so many international residents. We will kill people from around the world. It will be a mighty blow. Your government will be shamed. And don’t forget the second part of the operation, what the building will fall on.”

“Ah, so it isn’t all bad,” Johan said, easing up. “Foreigners being killed, the government shamed. I can’t say that I can oppose that.”

“Now your brain is working,” Randy replied. “Change, and we will get on the job.”

Five minutes later, they went to the basement to get the bombs. Surprisingly, the disguise suited Johan. He looked the most like an HVAC man and the team leader, but his delicate lungs were not playing the part. Choking, sneezing, he kept halting on the way up. Ali was in the lead, slowly pushing his wheeled generator, or dynamite and

plastic explosive disguised as such, up the long pitted concrete ramp. Halfway up, a long slide-across gate fastened with a heavy metal latch had to be opened and pulled clear. Randy had that task, and he had to hold the heavy gate because the braces that had originally kept it open had rotted away. Johan inched up, still far below, and Randy began to curse before bellowing, "Hurry the fuck up! My arms are getting tired."

Johan obeyed and pushed past him, still pausing to sneeze. Randy released his grip and jumped aside as the heavy gate slid across and closed with a bang that shook dust bunnies from the walls. Ali was ahead, cresting the top of the ramp. The truck was up there in the dark, as Johan had brought it right through the broken segment. He had managed to drive over the busted concrete to a spot near the ramp. Johan reached into his pocket as he wanted to switch the truck's lights on, and while doing it, he sneezed, hit a rut, slipped, and fell. Because he fell over the front of the generator, he panicked, and as he scrambled up, it rolled back on him. As he struggled to hold it, he tipped it on its side. The casing scraped the concrete, slid down a few feet, and came to a halt.

"You idiot!" Randy shouted as he hurried up the ramp in the near total darkness. Johan sneezed again as Randy knocked him aside.

"Sorry," Johan said. "That thing is heavy, and that stuff scares me."

Randy grunted as he righted the generator, turned it, and pushed it forward. Johan put on the truck's lights.

"It won't blow that easily," Randy said. "You put a ding in the cover, and now it doesn't stay on right. These are supposed to look brand-new."

Ten minutes later, Johan looked about warily as he drove off the factory lot. He saw nothing but had a strange feeling someone was watching. It was so prevalent, raising the hairs on the back of his neck, that he felt like getting out and looking around. He lifted a shaky hand from the wheel and noticed Randy staring at him.

"You are lucky Ali is in the back with the bombs. If he saw you looking so frightened, he would punch you."

"It's just a bad feeling. I couldn't sleep. I get nightmares about somebody watching me."

"I know the feeling, but there is not much use for it here. In Syria and Iraq, that feeling of someone watching could suddenly turn into an attack from predator drones. Some fighters have a sixth sense for it. But don't worry. I had Ali patrol the outside of the factory earlier. There is no one watching."

Randy's words worked to calm Johan. He turned onto the road, and after driving a stretch without seeing a single car, he felt better. But he could not relax. Driving so carefully was not part of his normal routine, and old habits kept coming back. Randy glared at him silently after he took a wide turn and bounced the truck in a deep rut. Furrowing his brow, Johan concentrated on the road, only getting jumpy when they passed a shabby apartment complex named The Three Oaks. As an enhancement to the broad, dingy structures, three police cruisers were parked on the roadside beside them.

Arrival at the Liberty Import Complex meant navigating the heaviest traffic. A sprawling structure with a high central tower, the import complex was still booming with business.

It drew traffic because it was a major storage market. Cars, vans, and trucks choked the side streets. Johan realized that he should have approached from the east to enter from the back; not doing so meant being stuck in a traffic jam on Brocton Road at the front. He felt like pounding his horn, but did not do so. Fear of Randy was one reason. The other reason was the sight of two RCMP cars parked near the fortress-like structure across from the import complex.

Since Johan was going nowhere, he studied the building. The sign said CEGHQ, and that lit up his memory. The acronym was for the City Emergency Government Headquarters. Johan had read about it, but had never really done more than study it in passing. He knew it was mostly underground and could see the two main entries. Just across the narrow street from the import complex's central tower, the entrances would be buried when the big bombs went off. Johan thought about it, shrugged his shoulders, and then forgot about it altogether. Traffic was moving; it was time to turn around back.

There was another wait in traffic, as they had to get through a gate arm controlled from a guard post in the service area they were entering. Randy had his head out the window, staring at the complex. "This city has buildings much older. I'm surprised they would tear such a huge building down."

Johan nodded. "It testifies to the wear and tear that hits a building with constantly changing tenants that move tons of supplies in and out. This isn't the Middle East. There are endless city work orders forcing repairs. I bet they've piled up, and the maintenance costs are too high. I read that when the place is demolished, a portion of the lot will be a park fringe with trees. The newer skyscraper going up won't crowd the entry area to the city bunker."

"There you go," Randy said. "We are just speeding up the development of some green space."

"Yeah," Johan replied. "I see demolition like that. It does nothing but clear away some dead wood so new people can take their place."

Feeling Randy's hostile eyes suddenly boring into him, Johan was glad that a security guard was coming over. The guard wore a paramilitary-style uniform, and he leaned down to the window as Johan stopped at the gate arm. The uniform served to enhance the guard's distorted figure, in that he was too tall, with square shoulders and awkwardly long legs. Johan recoiled from the man's weathered horse face and tall comb-back of hair.

"I'll need to see ID before you enter," the guard said, smiling idiotically to reveal crooked teeth with a wide space between them.

"What?" Johan replied, and he wasn't just pretending to take offense. The guard's garlic breath had nearly withered him in his seat. "We're from Tropic Air HVAC." Johan displayed the badge on his work outfit. "This is a special delivery ordered by the property manager."

The guard released a rude grunt. He walked back over to the guard hut and conversed with his superior, a three-hundred-pound guard, who, if he gained a few more pounds, would burst the tiny building apart. He barely made it through the door, and as the uniformed man explained things, he squinted at Johan and the truck.

“Shit,” Randy said. “I hope that big slob is sitting on one of the bombs when they go off. Western society disgusts me. It is filled with overweight pigs.”

“The other one must’ve eaten a mandrake root to shape shift into that form,” Johan said, while privately thinking about numerous overweight Muslims he’d seen in the past, but wouldn’t be mentioning at this point in time. For that matter, mentioning Randy’s extra poundage wouldn’t be a good idea at this time either.

Banging noises came from the back of the truck. They both knew it was Ali, growing impatient.

“Rats,” Johan said. “That guard heard that. Here he comes.”

The tall paramilitary guard appeared again at Johan’s window. For some reason, Johan ignored him as he watched his obese partner squeeze back in the door of the hut. This caused the guard to again grunt.

“Damn,” Johan said. “Don’t they teach you people customer service skills?”

“You aren’t a customer. This is a security checkpoint, and protocol has to be obeyed.”

“But ... but ... look at the rest of the building here at the back. There are trucks at docks everywhere, and I don’t see security hassling them.”

“True, but they did not pass this checkpoint. Our logs note that you will arrive and access the building via the main mechanical rooms.”

“So, we are in the logs. We should be. The property manager made this order personally. What is your fucking beef?”

“There is a security protocol to follow, and that means I must open the back of the truck and check the contents. You can start by declaring any perishable items you are carrying.”

“Fuck!” Johan shouted. He pounded the steering wheel. “We are delivering power equipment. The only thing that will perish is you if you touch it. Our company is not going to be liable for something a nosy security guard does.”

“Sir, please keep in mind that I am paid to be nosy. Now open the back, I just want a look. We have to make sure no contraband is coming in with that electrical equipment. This is an import and export complex, and we are always on the lookout for drug smuggling.”

Johan opened the door, got out, and slammed it. He heard Randy slam the passenger-side door. Johan was going to stare the guard down, but suddenly realized how tall the man was as he had to look up to him. That killed the effect as it made Johan feel small. “What is your name? I’m going to report you to the property manager.”

“Fred’s the name, and complaining about my doing a standard security check will do you no good.”

“Listen, Fred. If we were delivering drugs, we wouldn’t bring them in through your checkpoint. Only repair people and maintenance come in this way.”

The guard led the way to the back, and before Johan could open up, the guard tapped his knuckles against the door.

Scowling, Johan edged him aside and opened the door. As he did, the guard stepped forward, pulled a flashlight, and shone its beam into the interior. Only, it revealed no interior; it revealed Ali standing there with a big grin on his face. Ali stepped forward, smacked the flashlight out of the guard's hand, and it bounced on the asphalt. Ali then used both arms to push Johan and the guard aside as he jumped down.

The guard stumbled to the right, his eyes bright with offense. He windmilled his right arm at his partner. The big man emerged from the hut and slowly walked over, rolling a lot of self-important weight as he did. "Can't you take care of this yourself?" the big man growled.

"They had a man in the back of the truck," he said.

"Of course we did," Johan said. "We have to be sure that the cargo remains secure."

The big guard looked into the back of the truck and saw the secured generators. "You'll have to unload them by that door over there. You can't take that truck down into the bay."

An alarm suddenly rang on Fred's phone, and he pulled it out and tapped it off. "You can take it from here," he said to the other guard. "I'm now officially off duty."

"No, I won't," the big man said. "Your replacement is late, and I just got a call from Huma, the new secretary in the office. The new property manager wants to meet these guys and have them sign some paperwork. She's coming down now, and she will show them where to store these items. Her name is Marnia. You be polite, Fred. We want to make a good impression. Don't forget that you'll be looking for a job when this dump closes. You could use the connection."

"Okeedoak," Fred said. "I will escort these fine gentlemen and their cargo, and since I will already be inside, I will then go up to the employee lounge, change, and go off duty."

Ali, Randy, and Johan had remained silent through this brief exchange, and Johan found his temper settling now that things were moving along. Unfortunately, being pissed actually worked better for him on this job, because the only other mood was paranoia and a hundred what-if thoughts. What if they really had not been cleared after that airport bust, and they were somehow being tracked? What if the nosy security guard found the generators suspicious? What if the bombs were discovered before tomorrow's detonation? What if those women planted in the property management office weren't really terrorists but double agents? What if a thousand eyes were watching from those windows up there?

..... what if Randy was now punching him in the shoulder and the others were waiting for him to wake up. "Right, right," Johan said. "I'll move the truck over to the door and get this done."

Fred walked beside him as he went to the cab and got inside. "Too many hours on the road, eh, pal?"

"Sure, whatever you say."

The big guard raised the gate arm by pushing a button inside the hut. After Johan drove through, he busied himself with a porn magazine. Randy and Ali walked on either side of Fred as they headed to the service door.

“Where are you from to grow so tall?” Ali asked.

“It’s called the Canadian backwoods,” Fred said. “We eat the whole hog out there.”

Ali grimaced.

“Say,” Fred said, glancing at Ali. “You boys aren’t what they call head bangers, are you?”

“Head bangers?”

“Sure. They are people who pray by banging their heads on the floor. We got some of them out in the country now. Nigerian Shees, they are called.”

Ali realized Fred was talking about Muslims. Normally, he would stab someone for that, but because Fred had mentioned Nigerian Shias, he simply spat and said. “It is called Muslim, and most of us don’t bang our heads. That small group of Nigerians lacks purity. They set a bad example.”

“They sure looked pure to me. Pure black. Blacker than your local boys, that’s for sure. Now, Muslim, I don’t know much about that. I’m not studied on religion.”

“I did not think so,” Ali said. “Don’t worry. When we take over, so long as you pay the Jizya tax and don’t blaspheme, we will let you live.”

“Brother, I pay the Jesus tax every paycheck. Jesus, do I pay, so don’t be putting your hand out just yet.”

Randy decided to change the subject. “So what do you do when you are off work?”

“Well now ... I heard that where you boys come from, chasing the goat is a big sport. Here we have something similar. It’s called watching the bouncing boobs and counting the pink elephants over at the Imperial.”

They moved aside as Johan backed the truck up to the metal doors. “Why can’t we just drive in through the roll-up door?” Randy said.

“An inspector put a work order on the ramp,” Fred said. “The concrete is rotten, so we can’t use it for trucks. That side security door is wide enough for you to wheel your generators through. This place was built by assholes. Security has to direct moves all over this place because of odd construction and damage. You go down to the mechanical rooms under the tower. That area ain’t very nice. All of the basement, and the areas to its left and right, are executive parking. The sort of executive parking that is always under repair. This place leaks everywhere. When they built it, they installed pipes that are too small throughout the building. Everything is rotten from leaks, which is one of the reasons the place is going down.”

Johan popped out and came to the back. “Okay, Ali and Randy, unload the items. Listen, Fred, step over here. I don’t want you to get injured.”

Once they were aside, Johan pulled out his Kings. He offered Fred a smoke, which he accepted, and they lit up.

The truck had a crappy ramp that tended to shift sideways. Selecting the vehicle was another of Johan's errors, and he worried that Fred would inspect the generators. He did not want him to see the loose cover on the one he had tipped back at the factory.

As Ali wheeled the first generator down the ramp, Johan watched furtively from the corner of his eye. Randy, as strong as an ox, could make the job of taking the generator off easier if the ramp started to tip. Johan did not want Fred to notice the deep scratch in one casing, either, so he worked to distract him. Pulling a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket, he offered it to Fred. "Listen, pal. You're working overtime without pay, this will buy you a few beers."

Fred snapped the bill from Johan's fingers and pocketed it. As Fred took a deep drag from his cigarette and looked out at the fall day, Johan moved in the way to block any view Fred might have of the unloading. When it was done, he flicked his cigarette away and said, "Okay, open up."

No longer working to rule, Fred turned into a flurry of huge feet and awkward legs as he hurried over and unlocked the door. He glanced back at Johan. "My partner might have to call that manager lady again." Yanking the door open, he said, "Fuckin' bitch could've at least got down here by now."

A woman stood on the other side of the door. As Fred turned his gaze back from Johan, he found her staring at him. She looked officious and unhappy. She held a clipboard against her breasts, and as Fred continued to hold the door, she stepped out and past him.

Hair loose and dark, understated make-up, and dressed in a blazer with a figure-enhancing skirt, Marnia looked exactly like the Western businesswoman she was supposed to portray. She most certainly did not look like a terrorist.

Fred wore a grimace, expecting he would be disciplined, later, if not right away. Ali had stars in his eyes, like he was far off, seeing an angel. Johan did not see an angel, but what he did see caused him to display obvious signs of relief.

"Miss Marnia," Randy said smoothly. "It is so nice to finally meet you." His eyes shifted to Fred. "Let me apologize for this rude security guard."

"You can drop the Miss," Marnia said curtly. "And don't apologize unless it is for yourself. You are more than half an hour late."

"We were stuck in traffic. My fault," Johan said, watching as Marnia walked around the generators and made some check marks on her clipboard. She pursed her lips like she was satisfied with the inspection and nodded to Randy.

Fred cleared his throat. "I'll escort them down, Miss Marnia."

Marnia gave him a severe frown. "If you call me that once more, I will have you terminated. I will do the escorting. Lock this door from the outside once we are in, and then go to the foyer by my office. My assistant, Huma, is holding a meeting for all security personnel and will be issuing your new patrol schedules."

"Okeedoake ... I mean yes m...Marnia," Fred said, and then he swept his arm in a broad gesture toward the door, signaling Randy and Ali to move the goods.

Johan tried to open the door, and then he stepped over to Fred and whispered in his ear, "Unlock the door before she fires you."

Fred grinned, raised an eyebrow, and then used a key to open up. He held the door wide for them to get through. Randy took the handles on his generator and wheeled it through, followed by Ali with the second generator. Johan allowed Marnia in and entered last, waiting to hear the click of the lock as Fred closed up from the outside.

The ramp down had once been painted industrial gray, but it was now pitted and dust-covered. Bright LED lighting made it easy for Randy and Ali as they wheeled their bombs down the ramp. A mess of piping in various sizes and colors crowded both sides of the ramp. At its base, an open floor and rows of concrete pillars led them past a series of heavy doors into other mechanical areas and electrical rooms. The air was fetid, and pools of oily water were present on the open floor. Some of the overhead pipes dripped, even those near the door to the power and telephone rooms. They passed a decrepit area where the dusty floor had been piled with broken piping, metal pieces, rusty tools, discarded plastic bottles, and other junk repair people had left behind over the years. As they came to another row of mechanical rooms, Marnia called a halt.

She produced a set of keys from her jacket pocket and turned right at a door marked "Emergency Generator Room." The door creaked as she opened it and gestured for Randy to bring his bomb casing over. He managed to squeeze it through, and they entered the room, which was filled with dust and cobwebs. Other than the humongous emergency generator and a few wall-mounted control panels, there wasn't much else in the room.

Johan coughed. "Good pick for bomb storage. No one's been in here for years."

Marnia shot him a mean glance. "Do not use the B word. You probably are right that no one has been in here, though security is supposed to patrol all the rooms once a day. There definitely won't be anyone coming in it now, because it has been marked off limits on the new patrol schedule."

After placing his wheeled package behind the big machine, Randy came over and said, "My concern is more about placement. It will only be here for a day, so there is no chance they will find it."

"Placement is perfectly planned," Marnia replied. "Johan has been kind enough to give us an estimate of the explosive power. With the other device placed over in the chiller room, we will take out the right supports to send the tower crashing to our target across the road."

Randy's eyes sparkled. He nodded and smiled as though they were exchanging pleasant thoughts. Johan stared at Marnia, grim-faced, having a few obvious second thoughts about his role in this monstrous deal. Ali had been inspecting the emergency generator. He turned and stepped closer to Marnia, his dark eyes fixed on her ample breasts, an impish grin on his face. "The bombs are not the only things that are perfectly placed."

Marnia sneered at him. "You should set yourself right before Allah and think of proper things before you die."

“She is right,” Randy added. “You are on the path of an unbeliever. The chaste Muslim does not think such thoughts. He may only think of sex with his wives and his slaves, because the Prophet has declared it.”

Ali’s grin faded; Randy’s statement had soured his thoughts. It was indeed easy to preach sexual morality, but without slaves to bless with his affections, it was hard to put into practice.

“Really,” Johan said. “We are thinking of chastity now, are we? Well, this unfortunately chaste unbeliever thinks only of getting out of this smelly dump and avoiding arrest.”

The others turned their gaze on Johan, but none of them thought him important enough to address. His simple words served to end the conversation, and they left the room, pausing to look around. Seeing nothing worrisome, Ali seized the handles of his generator and waited until Marnia walked ahead, leading them forward, then left and right through a maze of tanks and piping.

“I wonder why they have so many boilers for this building?” Randy said.

“Those tanks aren’t boilers,” Johan replied. “Boilers would be in the top-floor mechanical rooms. See the toxic symbols. They used to store toxic chemicals in here. I say ‘used to’ because, by the looks of those tanks, I sure hope none are stored there now. Probably not. The tanks may be just another reason why this place is condemned. It doesn’t meet the new environmental standards.”

Randy’s expression brightened. He saw the tanks in a new light. “Sure would be fine if they are full. Adding a toxic chemical aspect to the catastrophe would be perfect.”

The chiller room was located in a dingy corner. A green door with a safety-glass window was next to it, and from it they could see into an underground parking area. Johan looked through the glass while Marnia unlocked the chiller room. “Hang on,” he said. “I see someone by a BMW over there. Can’t see him clearly. There’s a security guard too, but he’s walking away from us.”

Marnia opened the door, and Ali wheeled his package inside. Randy and Marnia followed him in. Neither of the two people Johan saw came toward the entry to the mechanical rooms, so he shrugged his shoulders, turned, and nearly walked into a pile of old racing bicycles leaning against the concrete wall. After booting one of the bikes aside, he went into the chiller room.

“According to the building plans, this old chiller is some form of backup,” Marnia said. “There is a new one in the upper mechanical room. I think they only use this old one on the hottest days to supplement the air conditioning.”

“Good,” Randy said. “Another room no one ever enters. Hey, don’t place the bomb right under the pipes.” Ali obeyed, moving it away from the pipes.

Johan decided to get in with his opinion. “Those water pipes will be destroyed no matter where you place it and they won’t affect the explosion. They’ll enhance the collapse, creating a fluid base under everything.”

Randy shrugged; Marnia nodded as though aware of that, then turned to leave. Ali followed immediately and stepped up when she was about to open the door. Having his

eyes on her lush hind end, and the sway of her skirt highlighting it, he was moved to reach out and grab a handful of the goods.

The response was instantaneous. Marnia spun on her left heel and swung to hit Ali, but he had anticipated it and dodged aside right after the squeeze. As Johan had been walking forward, he received the punch, which clipped his nose and cheekbone, causing him to yelp and stumble back a few steps. The blow drew blood, but Johan had a handkerchief in his pocket, and he pulled it quickly and applied it.

Marnia remained frozen and enraged. Her eyes had shifted from Johan to Ali. Laughing loudly, Ali slapped both his knees. Marnia took a step forward, so he monkey-danced backward over by the bomb.

Johan was trying to swear, but he was forced to hold his nose. Randy looked on the scene with a dimwit's expression on his face, as if he hadn't expected this situation and didn't have the brains to figure out how to deal with it. His hesitation and Johan's disability meant Marnia remained in charge, and she was already in motion. She pulled a blade from under her skirt and went for Ali.

This took the situation to code red; Marnia moved smoothly and slashed at Ali with the knife, but he again proved his skills by deftly dashing to the side and swinging around a pipe. The high swing would have taken him across the floor had he not crashed into the portable generator and tumbled. The blow knocked the top of the casing loose. It slid to the floor, exposing the bundled dynamite, plastic explosive charge, and mechanism inside.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Johan whimpered as Marnia eased forward like a stealthy cat, holding the blade ready to strike. Ali had jumped up fast, and the grin left his face now that this had become a deadly situation. He prepared to defend against the knife, then he saw something and pointed toward the door.

It opened, and a man strode forward out of the wash of dim light; it was Fred, the security man. His eyes were on Marnia and the knife, and then they shifted to Ali as he was still pointing at him, but only for a moment before his gaze settled on the exposed interior of the bomb. Fred's mouth then fell open. "Duh, duh," he stuttered as he pointed a long forefinger at the bomb.

Those words became his famous last words as Marnia turned to him, did an expert jump, and swept a slash with her blade. She moved so swiftly that Fred's was still pointing with his right hand when she neatly slit his throat.

His death was not pretty. Marnia pulled away from it, and Johan dodged it. Both of Fred's hands now went to his throat, but his left hand did not make it all the way up. He released a grotesque gurgle of blood and saliva and collapsed to the stone floor.

"Now look at what you've done!" Johan exclaimed. Initially, his eyes were on Marnia and the bloody knife, but seeing the fierce expression on her face, he turned his gaze to Ali, as if he was talking to him.

Randy's battlefield training had not prepared him for totally foolish and murderous domestic situations like this one. His eyes brightened as he stared at the dark blood pooling by Fred's body, then he looked up and saw Marnia with an evil eye on Ali. In a

smooth motion, he hurried forward and threw a punch that connected with Ali's jaw and knocked him down. He followed that by turning to face off with Marnia and using a left-hand viper strike to knock the knife from her hand. It flew across the room and bounced off a panel.

"There will be no more killing and no more foolishness," Randy said, grabbing Marnia's arm so she couldn't go around him.

"Thank God at least one person here is sane," Johan said.

Ali was rubbing his jaw and slowly getting up. Marnia did not attempt to retrieve the knife. She now stared down at Fred's body with a look of regret but not sympathy. She looked over at Ali, and regret turned to loathing. The stupid imp had got the better of her and created this unfortunate mistake. In the Middle East, such an error on a job would mean executions. However, the West was more liberal, and here they would be able to clean things up.

"Here's what is going to happen," Randy said. "Marnia, you will escort Johan to the emergency generator room, check on the bomb, and make sure no other guards are with this one. Ali will work with me to clean this up. We will figure out a method to dispose of the body."

Johan nodded to Marnia, turned, and went out the door. He thought he saw a shadow over in the tanks. It was there and gone. He nearly tripped over the pile of bikes again. He glanced through the glass at the parking area and saw no one. Marnia emerged, so he let her lead the way. Being her partner was not a personal preference, but it was a better idea than trying to figure out how to clean up the mess that remained of Fred. He hoped it would be done by the time they got back.

Marnia led him through a section that was much newer and neater with assorted pipes painted in red, green, and blue. She kept pausing to look all around. Johan also looked but saw no one. He pointed to one of the cameras.

"Don't worry," Marnia said. "I've taken care of that. No one is watching the cameras. They were called out for a meeting."

The emergency-generator room was more cluttered, and Marnia looked around again before producing her key. Johan walked in as Marnia held the door. The green-painted machine inside was about the size of a pickup truck. The concrete around it had formed a cracked depression, as if it were sinking into the earth. "This building is a humongous disaster," he said. "You'll actually kill some more people with the clouds of filth that roll over the downtown."

Marnia gave him a severe glance but said nothing in reply. She merely checked that the bomb was untouched, then waved Johan out the door. She followed him out and paused for a full minute, listening and looking around. Just as Johan was about to ask what was up, she stepped away and led him on the same route back. They were both surprised to find Randy and Ali loitering near the old toxic chemical tanks. Randy had his hands in his pockets. Ali was whistling a spooky tune.

"Stop that whistling, right now," Marnia said.

“Wow, was that fast?” Johan said. “Where did you put the body? You do realize we have to remove it somehow, or it will stink.”

“We’ve taken care of that problem,” Randy said. “It is sealed up, and it only has to last a day. We covered the blood inside the room with a lot of old newspaper.”

Johan looked over the group of rusting tanks. He saw no indication of a body, but if they said they’d done the job, he believed it. “Let’s get out of here. This place makes me very uncomfortable.”

Marnia’s expression changed to one of satisfaction as the bigger picture took hold in her mind. “Tomorrow, many people are going to feel much more uncomfortable.”

Randy nodded in wistful agreement, and Ali danced a little jig and clapped his hands. Both Marnia and Johan glared at him with hatred, but they did nothing other than follow Randy as he led the way out.

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It took Joe a while to verify that Ali and Randy were present at the factory. They had gone unusually silent, but considering recent events, it was understandable. The day had passed into gray shades, giving rise to boredom and sadness. Gusts of chilly wind sang in the pine trees and sent the occasional cone bouncing over the windshield. Giant lungs seemed to be at work as the wind would die then rise again. It led to gloomy introspection that Joe did not enjoy. On this unusual job, one would do better to keep moving or at least have a flow of events to work with. The low points were especially depressing. He had to consider that he’d stepped into a realm of the abnormal. Detectives of all types served selfish principles, whether they admitted it or not, and there was really nothing in this for him. It was all pain for no tangible personal gain. Rationalizing it as doing a job for personal satisfaction was one avenue to sanity. He wondered if his hidden motive was a lack of self-worth, making him feel he had to prove himself by somehow cracking this case and setting things right. The proposition wasn’t logical when the risks were so great. Had his determination become simple foolhardiness? It was a question that brought to mind just driving away. No one man could stop terrorism. If not here, then it would happen somewhere else on another day.

There really was nothing to prevent him from just bailing out. Perhaps he was doing this simply because he could. If Josie had been home, he would not have pursued any of this. There would have been better things to do. Hell, most guys would have found a better use for some free time. Perhaps it even boiled down to idiocy. He was just as much an idiot as the people he was pursuing. Someone who simply didn’t know that life was about getting out there and enjoying a social life. He thought about that, then shook his head in disagreement with himself. Enjoying himself while Josie was away would mean other women. He wouldn’t look for them, but as soon as he went out with old pals or to parties, they would appear. They always did, and there would be scandals and rumors. It was sad to think that if he weren’t in this trouble, he would be in some other duck soup.

The cloudbank suddenly broke as though it had been hit by a skeet shooter. He was about to drive away into the sunshine when Johan showed up in the truck. Joe watched

closely as he got out and opened the gate. Johan's behavior was distinctly paranoid because he shielded his eyes with a salute as he looked off to the tree line in the north.

Joe knew no one was there, so perhaps Johan was seeing ghosts. Johan sauntered to the back of the truck and looked behind him at the stretch of empty road, and then he got in and drove around back.

The spare time had allowed Joe to learn the lay of the land surrounding the factory. He had walked it and taken numerous photographs that he studied inside the van. That knowledge allowed him to take off at a run through the scrub, headed for a cluster of pines at the rear of a sandy mound. Johan had already gone in through the opening at the back by the time he got there, so now he had to wait again. He got down flat on a bed of pine duff, and the sunlight and his field glasses allowed him to see in through the broken walls. He could see much of the concrete flooring around the truck and Johan fading into the gloom beyond a heap of cinder blocks. Intuition told him this was probably it.

If they were moving now, it would be to the final act. Not because of any smarts Johan might have, but because terrorists would have their own instincts. After being picked up by the airport, they would be certain that the police dogs had their scent. They would want to close the deal before it was too late.

With that idea in mind, Joe waited patiently and received his reward when the truck lights came on, and Ali walked into view, wheeling the first bomb to the back of the truck. The generator disguise was a good one, as they were really just huge painted metal cases on wheels, marked 17,500 watts on the side. The signal that detonated them would likely be about one watt, with tremendous explosive power.

They pulled a battered metal ramp down from the truck and loaded the bomb in the back. Joe's field glasses zoomed in on the work outfits the three men were wearing. He spotted a Tropic Air HVAC logo on the overalls. Since they were all dressed alike, it meant they were masquerading as a team of servicemen and using that disguise for access to plant the bombs. HVAC men wheeling large generators anywhere might arouse the suspicion of a smart security person, but Joe knew most regular people were not that bright. If the terrorist twins had a delivery plan, it would probably be good enough to work for them.

The second bomb was loaded, and he watched as Ali got into the back with the merchandise. Joe was caught off guard by how quickly Randy and Johan piled into the cab and drove off. He raced through sumac scrub, twigs cracking underfoot. He got most of the way to his vehicle, then he stopped and zoomed in on Johan as he got out to open the gate. Johan was looking around warily, and Joe dropped down into the scrub to avoid being spotted.

It meant the tail would be difficult, as for once Johan was being observant. One great aid was that the large, unmarked white panel truck would be much easier to tail than most other vehicles. Joe ran to the van, hoping for luck. That luck arrived as bad luck because he nearly lost them. He couldn't come up behind them on the lonely road, and with no view of them at the nearest intersection, he had the choice of right, left, or straight ahead. He chose right because it was the fastest route into town. After gunning

the engine and following a curve, he caught sight of them. From that point onward, the tail became much easier because traffic was heavy, making it easy to spot them ahead, while he remained nearly invisible well to their rear.

The tail continued to go well until Johan got locked in a traffic jam near the Liberty Import Complex. Joe was trapped a ways behind them, and it looked like they would escape the jam and him, but then Johan turned around back of the complex. It meant that the Liberty was their destination and target. Since the area at the back was spacious with a number of vehicle entries, getting in to follow them right away would be good.

Unfortunately, he remained boxed in due to a semi that had emerged and blocked traffic, causing a fender bender just behind it. Ten frustrating minutes passed before Joe could reach the turn and get around back. A quick scan of the area showed Johan's truck inside, past one of the gate arms. The signs marking that area read "Building Contractors Only" and "Not A Delivery Route."

Rather than pull in, Joe cruised along the back and parked at the curb where a screen of sickly trees and other vehicles would block any view of him. He got out and walked closer, gaining a view from behind a huge dumpster full of earth and concrete chunks. The odor of spices was in the air from a truck unloading at one of the drive-ins, and there was a general hubbub of activity at the back. Shouts from workers carried on the gusting wind, and he could see Johan, Randy, Ali, a woman, and a goofy security guard, though he could not hear them.

It was apparent they would deliver the items to the lower mechanical rooms because the only doors from that lot led down there. He studied the woman closely for some moments and recognized her as one of the women from the airport hotel. The business attire worked very well on her, and no doubt it was the clothing Johan had chosen on their mall outing. It proved him to be a smart shopper but otherwise not bright. Joe had an excellent memory for faces, and he could see that the woman had done a clever job of altering her looks with makeup. She looked much prettier now. With makeup and modern dress, a woman could make the Arab and Muslim background nearly vanish.

A better view showed him that the goods had been unloaded. From a distance, they looked just like large generators. No one would suspect them of being bombs. Beyond them in the delivery lot, he saw a gaggle of uniformed security personnel leaving the area, walking toward a distant canopied entrance. If anything convinced Joe that security could be useless in preventing terrorism, it was those moments of watching one guard aid with the delivery of the bombs, others going on their merry way, and the gatehouse guard sitting astutely at his post.

He now knew where they were going, so he decided to put a risky plan into action. It meant returning to the van and changing into his own repairman outfit. That took a minute, and he got back into the driver's seat looking more like the Lockwood-Fireman. The disguise wasn't perfect; no Lockwood logo on the outfit, but it would have to do. He glanced in the mirror to make sure the wig and generic baseball cap worked, and then pulled out, turned, and headed for the same gate arm and lot.

The big guard astutely ignored him as he waited at the gate arm, and Joe rapped his knuckles on the steering wheel and wondered how high the man would fly if the bombs went off. He realized that it was probably better that security here was stupid. If all of those guards were suddenly alerted and closed in on the terrorists, it would likely mean a suicide detonation and one devastating explosion.

Joe shut off the engine, got out, and walked over. He rapped on the window of the hut. The overweight brute grunted, slid it open, and said, "Not another fire inspection! Jeeze, don't you guys ever take a break?"

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Our union isn't as solid as yours; we have to work. I'm not part of the usual inspection crew. There was an alert from your fire panel: carbon monoxide. Lockwood sent me in to check that right away."

"Come back later. I have no escort guard."

"I just saw a whole group of guards over there."

"Management sent them to a special meeting, and I have to man this post."

"Not anymore, you don't. Listen, Jack, you have to escort me right now, or I'll ring the alarm bells and order an evacuation. I need you to take me to the fire-panel room and the camera room. I need to check the alerts and see your surveillance cameras."

The big guard rose slowly and exited the hut; he reeked of cigar smoke and sweat. He spoke through battered yellow teeth. "My name is not Jack. It is Alphonso."

Joe chuckled. "I thought Alphonso types didn't beat around the bush?"

"Around here, they call me Big A, and my word is the word. Listen, I can escort you this one time. Don't expect it again. We have a guardroom with most of the cameras right near the fire room, but I've never had a fire guy check the camera room before. Why would you do that?"

"A quick look around. Often, the panel doesn't get the location right. Carbon monoxide can put people to sleep, and the effects can be permanent. A quick camera check gives a fast indication if the gas is spreading."

Big A's eyes were round hazel coins over purple bags and bulldog jowls with a whisker shadow. He gave no emotional indication of what he thought. Usually, Joe knew when people thought he was full of shit, but with this guy, he didn't. Maybe it was because he thought everyone was full of it.

"Wouldn't you use a meter to detect carbon monoxide?"

Joe pulled a portable, yellow plastic carbon monoxide detector from the pocket of his overalls. "I use this. The panel alert says lower mechanical room, but I would still like a glance at the cameras."

"Okay, let's go," he said. "I need a walk."

Joe walked with him, wishing he could escape the haze of body odor Big A carried as personal atmosphere.

"We get fire alerts and fire alarms all the time," Big A said. "It's mostly because of the water leaks and the faulty sprinkler system. Never seen you before, but they send so

many guys that I don't know who is who. I really need a camera setup in my guard hut, but they don't want to pay for anything. The place is being demolished soon."

They passed Johan's truck, and Big A led Joe to another entrance marked staff only. It was a key lock only, and Big A fumbled with a big set of jingling keys.

"Isn't that demolition sometime off?"

"Yeah, it is. Many of the customers with offices here will relocate to the new Junction Building. I'll be going there, too. The union couldn't do anything about the demolition. It is really about money. In the city, all the real estate is in the air, and the new building here will be a lot taller."

"As if this place isn't big enough," Joe said as they stepped into a grimy tiled hallway with walls the color of nicotine. They were barely inside when Joe felt his nostrils constricting, irritated by the thick musty fragrance that permeated the building.

"This tower is big, but the complex sprawls on both sides of it, and that adds up to wasted real estate here where it is worth a fortune. I used to patrol this entire place. It took an hour and a half just to walk through it all at night. With all the odors here, it is like walking through part of Pakistan."

Judging from Big A's weight, Joe felt that none of those patrols was recent, and since they were at the fire room and A was opening it, he didn't press the issue. Big A held the door wide for Joe to enter, and on the inside, Joe immediately saw that the fire panel was modern and serviced by Lockwood. The sticker was on the outside of the glass. If it hadn't been Lockwood, he might not have gotten inside so easily. Since the reading on the electronic display said "normal," Joe blocked Big A's view, quickly went to the button panel, and brought up trouble alerts from the panel history. He flicked a few switches at the top of the panel, then turned to the guard. "Let's see the cameras."

The big guy was hesitant. "Doesn't the panel tell you exactly where the trouble is?"

"Underground. The switches I just clicked on are for the underground exhaust fans. They are all running now, but I'll have to drive down there with my meter and check it out. I will have to go alone. Can't put you at risk. It's probably something in the mechanical rooms, and I might have to make a quick repair."

"Mechanical rooms. I just let some people down there. Delivery of some kind. Nobody drives directly down there now. The ramp is full of potholes."

"Let's check the cameras and see if everything looks okay down there."

"Sure," Big A said. "That particular guard station is just down the hall."

Joe let him walk ahead, keeping his mind focused on how he might have to improvise. There was a big glass window in the wall and another in the door to the camera room, but no one was inside, it was locked, and the lights were off, though the screens were aglow with images.

"Damn," the guard said. "That place is supposed to always be manned."

"So why isn't it?"

He fiddled with his keys again, carefully picking out a big silver security key. "A new property manager called a meeting for all the guards, but half of our men are already gone. A new patrol company takes over for the last few days of the demolition. Fucking women. This new property manager bitch is named Marnia. She was just out there in the parking lot, taking some idiots into the underground."

Opening the door, he let Joe in first. Wasting no time, Joe went to the displays. There were ten of them, but he quickly found a wide-screen monitor with postcard images of various parts of the basement. Big A ignored the displays. He turned on the light switch and walked over to a landline phone. "I'm gonna make a call," he said. "See if I can get a guard down here to man these cameras. They aren't supposed to be abandoned."

"Sure, do that," Joe said. "I'll just take a quick look."

As the guard jabbed buttons on the phone, Joe expanded a camera view with a movement icon showing in the corner. A full-screen image appeared, and it was so suddenly revealing that Joe stepped back and nearly bumped into Big A. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the guard had his back to him.

The action on the screen was of Randy and Ali. They had a body, partially wrapped in burlap, splayed across a wheelbarrow. The chest, shoulders, and head protruded, and Joe could see enough to guess that it was the quirky security guard who had escorted them. This image was in low-resolution semi-sepia, creating the feel of viewing an old-time murder mystery from the early days of color TV, when the colors were mostly washed out. The effect was to add a sinister air to Ali and Randy's facial features and actions. They looked evil, and Joe felt that was how they should look, though usually in bright daylight, they just came across as dumb brutes. They were in an area of decrepit old tanks, large tanks with toxic symbols on them. They were no longer used, as the area was clearly marked off-limits and enclosed by a metal railing. Randy had pulled aside a huge manhole cover in the floor. It was about twice as large as a standard cover, and Ali was angling the wheelbarrow. Using some force, Ali pulled the wheelbarrow up at a higher angle, and Randy forced the body down the hole. It disappeared, and Randy pulled the cover back into place.

Joe double-clicked to shrink the image back to postcard size. He saw Johan and the woman Big A called Marnia appear on another camera feed, and then he hit the minimize button to hide all the postcard views on this monitor. An icon at the bottom allowed him to bring up a screen of views of the underground parking area in the other part of the basement. He left that on the screen and turned to the guard. Big A was just putting down the phone. "God damn Fred," he said. "I wanted to keep him on for some overtime, but he probably guessed that and won't answer his cellphone. Can't get anyone else to answer, either."

Joe nodded and pretended to study the parking-area images. He had a solid clue as to why Fred wasn't answering the phone, because if Fred was the guard that had opened up for Johan and friends, his next patrol would be somewhere way up yonder. Or more realistically, down in the sewer, considering where his body went.

"I can't tell anything from the cameras. Wasted my time. I need to drive down to do some meter readings. Looks like this was a false alarm."

“Okay, but the way we will do it is you enter the regular underground parking and head north and park by the service door there. I can open that door from the hut with a switch.”

“I saw an area of old tanks in there on the cameras. Why are they there?”

“That goes way back. Don’t worry about them; they were scrubbed out long ago and then forgotten. PCBs ... one disposal company that used to be located here stored PCBs, and for quite a long time. PCBs can be stored temporarily until sent for proper disposal. Ten years back, they were caught dumping them into the sewer there. It was cleaned up, but the old tanks are still there because the company didn’t have any money left after bankruptcy to remove them.”

“Yeah, well, someone must’ve had the money to pay off the fire inspector. Those tanks were never legal, not even thirty years ago.”

Big A chuckled. “The money for paying off building inspectors finally ran out. This place is a warren of rot. They have a plan in place to kill the rats off once the people are out, and before they demolish. There must be a million of them.”

Joe walked with the guard to the door, grinning with him, even though rats and the case’s latest violent twist made him feel ill. He figured Johan and his pals would be heading up the ramp to leave by now. He wanted to make sure the phony property manager was with them, so he would be clear to go down.

As Joe and Big A stepped out into the sunlight, the woman was walking toward a side walkway, and the three men were standing by the truck. They did not look suspicious and, to the untrained eye, would fade into the colorless mural the Liberty dock area created.

“Drive over there to the parking entrance,” Big A said. “I’ll see you from the hut and press the button to let you in. I’ll unlock the north service door remotely as well.”

Johan had not driven off yet; there was some delay. Joe had the back of his van open and was fussing with the contents of a toolbox. He could see them in an animated discussion. Though he was in view, they did not seem to notice him. Joe wished he could read lips, but even without doing so, he could tell that Johan was upset and edgy. All three of them were smoking, and Johan flicked his butt away first and got inside the truck. The other two soon followed, and Joe watched the truck pull out, thinking that Johan, being the obvious dupe in this operation, had probably hoped his partners could plant the bombs without killing someone in the process of it. Johan, it seemed, retained a full range of emotions but only for selfish purposes. That made him different from Randy and Ali, who had undergone the full transformation into terrorist bottom feeders. It was hard to imagine them having real feelings of empathy or sympathy, though they could probably fake such emotions when needed, in the way a psychopath fakes such things.

Perhaps Johan was tired of their ugly surprises, and Joe felt about the same way. Assuming they would plant the bombs carefully without killing someone now proved a stupid assumption. Randy and Ali were terrorists, so Joe wondered why he kept expecting them to behave better than what they were. It would be the same with the woman; her movements revealed her to be far too athletic and smooth to be a property

manager. She could even be the one who had done the killing. She had obvious special training; Joe had seen it but knew that everyday people wouldn't notice it.

Special training aside, Joe now believed there was no such thing as a competent terrorist. Terrorism went against human nature, and even psychopaths would make mistakes. In this crew, Joe saw people who could brutally murder others and cause general mayhem, but not competency when it came to any sort of planning and execution.

Getting in the van, he paused for a moment, mentally mapping out what he was about to do. He wondered if his competency was also in question. Perhaps even his sanity. What he was about to do, no one else would do. Anyone else would go directly to the authorities, trusting them to take it from this point onward. Reporting it to Jason Kufner and Velisa Newport made the most legal sense, but for some reason, Joe found himself unable to trust them. Looked at as a whole, something was not right about this terrorist operation and the investigation into it.

Joe cruised around to the entry to underground parking, and the guard opened the roll-up door with a button at his hut. Joe went north and found he had to go through a second roll-up to exit visitor parking. Reaching out the window, he buzzed the guard, and a moment later, the door went up. The employee lot was much bigger and had more vehicles. He saw one man walking through it, and no one else, which made him feel better. He parked, then went up to the green door that led to the mechanical area. The guard was good for his word because the maglock clicked open before he reached it.

He stepped through and looked around. Most of this area was a concrete floor with clusters of pipes, a clutter of items, and designated areas. Separate marked rooms were on the east and west sides. He was standing beside a humongous concrete support pillar with a trickle of dirty water running down its side. He stepped over, went down a long aisle, and spotted another similar pillar at the far end. The first room, the chiller room, was just beyond the pillar and a heap of old bicycles. Another door into the parking lot was nearby. He tried the chiller-room door, and it was locked as expected.

Joe removed the small pry bar he had hidden in his overalls and forced the door open. It popped open readily, and he stepped in and turned on the light. There was an old, obviously out-of-service chiller taking up much of the room, and assorted junk, such as old gunmetal-gray filing cabinets. A plastic tarp covered one mound, so Joe pulled it aside, only to find a heap of obsolete computer monitors that had probably been in there for about ten years. Joe spotted a section of floor covered with yellowed newspaper and, on a hunch, lifted some of the paper, finding the bottom of it soaked with blood. It meant the killing had happened here, but that mattered little now, so he put the papers back in place, then cursed as he stumbled over a rut in the concrete. As he caught his balance, he spotted a track through the dust. It led him to the bomb, which had been forced in behind the chiller, where it would not be noticed even if someone entered the room.

Seizing the handles, Joe wheeled it out into the open, paused to look it over, and was impressed. Basically, the bomb was a generator on two wheels with yellow handlebars so it could be moved about. They had taken all the guts out and refurbished the casing

to contain the explosive material. It would not fool an electrician because most generators were not completely enclosed in a rectangular shell. Most weren't nearly this big or marked with such high wattage either. It would definitely fool most other people. It would also explode with a city-shaking blast, and since it and the other bomb were located under the central tower next to the main supports, the building would tumble down. Most likely, it would topple over rather than collapse into its footprint.

At least it would if the bombs remained in the building, which they wouldn't because Joe's plan involved removing them. He walked backward, wheeling the bomb across the broken concrete and out the door. Grabbing a heavy cinder block from nearby, he propped open the door to the parking. The long rectangular case scraped the sides of the door as he forced it through, and the casing nearly came off. An old fire door rested against the wall behind the pile of bicycles, so Joe dragged it out and used it as a ramp. It was awkward, but he managed to force the bomb up into the van. With that done, he pushed the door inside and closed the van's rear doors. The lock on the chiller room hadn't broken when he popped it, so it was easy to push it shut.

He was feeling grimy and sweaty and in a desperate hurry. The camera guard could come back on duty at any moment or even be on already. If spotted or questioned, he planned on bluffing his way out, saying the generators were illegally stored and he was removing them due to fire safety rules. He hoped it wouldn't come to that because for his plan to work, he needed the terrorists to think the bombs were still in place. That meant the property manager could not be notified of their removal.

Moving quickly through the main mechanical room, Joe tried to guess where the other bomb would be located. Since the four largest tower supports were in the four corners, and to the east, west, north, and south, he had three remaining options. Taking out two supports would tumble the building, and as he stopped to think, he spotted a wheeled track through a greasy portion of the concrete apron. Following the track, he saw the area of tarnished tanks where the body had been dumped. Glancing over at a mounted security camera, he tensed. He spotted the emergency generator room and guessed it to be the location. It pried open easily, and on the inside, he located the bomb. Without hesitation, he eased it out of the room and took it at a slow walk to the other end and his van. He shut the door to the mechanical area, and a few minutes later, he had both bombs inside the van. It took another couple of minutes to secure them with straps, and then, with fingers crossed, he was on his way out.

He could have, and maybe should have, just driven away, but he decided that might arouse suspicion, so he parked and walked back to the guard hut. At the window, he noticed a glum expression on Big A's face.

"Just letting you know I'm done, all is clear. Say, what knocked your head? You looked much more cheerful earlier."

"Over time, that f...ing new property manager," Big A said. "That's her driving off now in that cheap Ford rental. She took the rest of the day off. She sent the guards off early, too. Never seen that before. Good thing you're done, or I would have had to go down there looking for you."

“Why’s that?” Joe asked, worried that the camera surveillance people had picked him up.

Big A lifted some yellow sheets from his counter. “Seals. The property manager wants the mechanical area and the rooms in it sealed off for two days. I have to stick these on the entry doors, and they can’t be broken. Never seen that before, either.”

“It’s just you on duty?”

“Just me.”

“So do as she says, put on the seals. Then work to rule. Do no patrols. Collect the overtime and take it easy.”

“Now there’s the wisdom of a sporting man. That is exactly what I’m going to do.”

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Clouds raced past the moon, slowly filming it over until all went slate dark. To Ali, it was like the fierce eye of Allah had closed, telling him to get some sleep and ready himself for the big day to come. He took a big breath of the cool air spilling in through the cracked window. He felt exhilarated and not much like sleeping. Below, the factory grounds were silent and secure. He’d covered the entire perimeter at nightfall, using a flashlight with a beam as bright as a spotlight. There were no breaches in the fence, no signs of human activity, meaning all was clear. The close call at the airport hotel had led to nothing substantial. Attention from national security agencies that they feared had not materialized. Being seen as backward Muslims had its advantages.

Turning, Ali walked over protesting floorboards to the center of the room and inspected the weapons laid on the scarred hardwood table. They had been given AR-15s and plenty of ammunition. The weapon was a solid choice for smooth and easy shots to take down man-sized targets at close range. People would start running immediately, and this weapon promised to be a fun choice for picking them off once they panicked. Randy’s advice had been to get inside the mall with the weapons hidden in a discreet carry case and then use a washroom to get ready for the shooting. “Don’t shout ‘Allahu Akbar’ immediately,” Randy had warned. “People run fast when panicked. Even security people run off fast, and you lose targets. A brief delay in the panic will provide more targets. Don’t waste repeat shots on wounded targets. Many of them will die later, and once we have momentum, we want to maximize the body count. It is about terror, but it is also about death. I know that many of the devout like to do a suicide with a nail bomb, but nothing can compare with the satisfaction of gunning down these cowardly sheep. We are the justice of the Prophet out to hunt, and they will know it.”

Picking up one of the weapons, Ali polished it with a cloth as Randy’s advice came to mind. He smiled, then someone touched him on the shoulder, startling him. The gun clattered on the table as he swung around. Randy was there, and he caught both of Ali’s arms before he could strike out.

“Damn you. Why are you so quiet now? You usually make more noise than an elephant.” Ali breathed the words into Randy’s face.

"I have a reason to be quiet. I just did a search of most of the place."

"Why? I did a perimeter patrol. No one could be in here but us."

Randy reached into the pocket of his jacket. He pulled out two tiny gray boxes. Using his fingernails, he snapped one open, revealing a tiny circuit board.

"Electronic ears," Ali said.

"Yes. This one was right outside that door, stuck against a railing. Don't worry, it's disabled now. There are no bugs in here, I checked. I'm willing to bet there are a few others in the building. It would take a long time to find them all."

"If it were national security or Islamophobic police, they wouldn't sit and listen to us now. They would have already raided this place."

"Exactly. It has to be Jalal and Andras. They've been spying on us all along."

"What does it mean?"

"Betrayal. They are probably planning a way to take the glory from us. Probably their group of Nazis wants the credit. I had a bad feeling about Jalal right from the beginning. He plays Muslim, but he simply has nothing Muslim about him. No Muslim would hang around with a man like Andras. How can you be a Muslim and a Nazi? There is a creepy aspect to Jalal. I suspect that he may be a Christian convert."

"I saw something like that, too. There are evil spirits about Jalal. Maybe he's done the ultimate blasphemy of converting to a crusader. I don't like his choice of friends. Andras is a kafir, no better than the most unclean dog. Think about their lying story. They are working for money, and helping us because they enjoy terrorism. Why would they let us use them when they can use us?"

"Those people are political. They don't work just for money. It doesn't matter now. We have found them out and can still keep control of this."

"How?"

"We send a message overseas right now and have our statement and video clip released earlier than planned in the morning. We still control the bombs, and we will set them off earlier. Before we do, I will send Jalal a message saying something might be wrong, that we want them to come here to speak to us privately."

"Then we kill them, set off the bombs, and take the holy road to martyrdom, knowing all will be well in paradise. They won't suspect a thing. They left us in control of the detonation, thinking it would keep us fooled about their intent. But Allah has spoken, and we are now enlightened."

"Exactly," Randy said, patting Ali on the back. "Exactly."

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Joe waited in the darkness as the minutes crawled by. He felt so anxious that his hands were trembling. He picked up the bolt cutters, and then he put them down, pulled a metal flask out of his pocket, and drank a solid shot of Wild Turkey. He waited a few

moments, stretched, relaxed, and then went to work, slowly cutting out a section of the chain link fence. Despite the imposing look of the fence, his cutters chopped the links easily and with almost no noise. Not that a little noise would have mattered, as he was across the field at the back of the factory. However, being stealthy was important, and there had been worrying signs. He'd had to pull away quietly earlier when Ali had emerged in the twilight, covering the entire fence with a patrol, carefully inspecting the entire perimeter with a bright beam. Fortunately, he hadn't parked near the fence, and Ali started his patrol on the far side. It had also gone silent inside, and Joe was certain they'd discovered some of the bugs. Those two looked stupid, but they weren't completely dumb. Nevertheless, finding the bugs would only confuse them, since it would be hard to figure out who planted them. Cops or spooks wouldn't be bugging them at this stage of the game, and they would know that. Ali's perimeter check had turned up nothing, so Joe hoped he could move in without being caught by any sudden midnight patrol.

He'd cut a neat rectangle out of the fence. This section ran through a screen of tall brambles and bushes at the back, so they wouldn't notice unless they did another complete patrol. Squatting, Joe tried to see through the dark night, but all he saw was the factory imprinted against the murk of a cloudy, moonless sky. It was almost like looking at the hulk of a sunken ship in the deep dark of the ocean bottom. The night was quiet; he could hear the occasional barking of a guard dog a long way off to the north. No signs of life came from the factory. All looked clear, so Joe began to move, squeezing the first of the wheeled bombs through the fence and making slow progress as he crossed the field, headed for his chosen entry point at the back of the factory.

The approach he'd chosen was the safest. If they were awake and maybe nervous, they would look out at the front. The upper intact section they were in did not have windows at the rear. Joe had covered the bombs with black tarps, just right to hide them in the night. Doing this job with the original bright, near-florescent paint job on the generator casings would have been too risky. It was a gamble and difficult by any stretch, but he was doing it anyway, pausing at the odd rut and cracking of twigs as he approached the most damaged rear section of the factory.

It was cool; a wind of good fortune rattled loose boards, tin, and plastic on the old hulk, giving him cover. The bite of the booze served to make the time seem shorter, and when he was pushing the bomb through the same opening they used as a drive-thru to park, he was certain he'd made it clean. If not, there would have been shouts, maybe shots, and the sound of someone approaching at the very least.

The walls were knocked out here, but there was a roof overhead, and it increased the darkness to the point where he was temporarily blind. He waited; his eyes adjusted just enough to see, then he moved ahead and found the spot he'd picked earlier with field glasses. It shielded the bomb on three sides. Two sides had cover from a roof collapse, and the third was a heavy support post. Bushes covered the final angle; getting the bomb through them was problematic, and he made a bit of noise.

With the bomb planted, he moved away quietly and then stopped to check the field before moving out. Nothing but the wind riffling the weeds caught his attention, so he

jogged back to the fence and a few minutes later wheeled the second bomb through. He moved faster with this one, following the same track until nearly at the factory, and then he swung left and wheeled it to the other damaged side of the factory. Taking the bomb through an old, battered doorframe that was minus a door, he went inside in the dark and used his penlight. This was mostly open space with some rubbish. He spotted a door to what had probably been a storage area, so he wheeled the bomb toward it. He had never seen or detected any of the terrorists in this ground-level section. They didn't even patrol it, but there were footprints in the deep dust and leading to the door, so they must've been in here at some point. He hesitated; the footprints also tracked back out, so he wheeled the bomb over. The door was not locked, but he had to open it very slowly due to a nasty hinge squeak. Flashing the penlight around, he saw nothing in the room but an old rusty drum. He brought the bomb in and was about to leave. Then curiosity took hold, and he walked over to the drum. It had a loose lid, which he lifted. He saw wires and a package under the lid and quickly put it back on. There was also a strong odor of kerosene.

"A crude incendiary bomb with a cell phone detonator," he thought, and he almost whistled in surprise. Then he wondered. "What the fuck?" A couple of possibilities came to mind as he remembered seeing a similar drum over by the area where he'd placed the other bomb. Either Ali and Randy were going to demolish and torch this place when they left, or the others were going to torch it, perhaps with Ali and Randy still inside.

Joe had spent a few hours living with the possibility that the bombs he'd purloined would be detonated. He'd had to comfort himself with the idea that they'd almost certainly want a midday explosion of the Liberty Import Complex. Now there was the possibility that the old factory was going to be blown to a sky-high lick of flame. The quickest way to find relief was to get away from the place. He closed the door quietly, and then he moved quickly from the building and raced over the field. Looking back from the fence, he felt a great sense of comfort wash over him. No matter what happened now, at least he could be sure he wouldn't be blown halfway to the moon.

Perhaps someone was going to take a derelict factory spaceship to Mars. He'd find out in the morning. Until then, he planned to get at least a couple of hours' sleep in the van.

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Chapter Nine: The Big Bang

Johan's night involved tossing and turning for hours as nightmares peppered his restless sleep. Most of them involved money, and the dreams rose from his suspicion that he would not be paid in full. The money dumped into the private account set up for him barely covered his costs on this terrorism deal. Andras had promised that the rest of the money would be sent. It would be there in the account by midnight at the latest. When nothing came in by 3 am, Johan called Andras and got no answer. Johan then paced back and forth in his bedroom for a while before losing it and bouncing his phone off the wall.

During the next couple of distressing hours, many thoughts passed through his mind, and his short sleep produced more ugly dreams. In one, he was wandering the bleak city dressed in rags and starving. That was followed by a most terrible dream where he

saw victims of the bombing dying horribly, screaming, falling, burning, buried alive, and clawing at the rubble. Those screams traumatized him. He woke in a guilty sweat, and a new idea came to mind.

Surely they didn't think he would murder all of those people for no charge. If they didn't pay, he could rush to the authorities and stop the whole deal. He could clear himself, see them jailed, and come out on the moral high road. Perhaps he could even come out of this a hero if he played it right. Scenarios passed like a river through his mind, but unfortunately, the waters were filled with incriminating sewage. Any following investigation would kill his hero status; not only that, but they would probably name him the kingpin who made it all possible with his expertise in demolitions and explosives. They would never buy his story of being blackmailed and coerced, and even if they did, he would still end up in jail for life.

As he woke fully, some of the confusion vanished. The sky was lighting up outside the window like an ugly, bleeding stain. He used an old T-shirt to mop sweat from his brow. He shook all the bad thoughts out of his head, and what remained was an image of the money. He needed the money, wanted the money. Perhaps Andras would answer if he called now. Spotting his phone on the floor beneath the window ledge, he picked it up.

"Fuck," he said as he realized that he had caused it to shut off when he threw it. At least it wasn't broken. He powered it up, tapping nervously on the screen while he waited. Unlocking it, he noticed he had no messages, meaning the bastards hadn't returned his call. He was just bringing up Andras' number when a text alert beeped. Checking it right away, he found that it was a message from Ali, sent an hour ago. "Meet us at the factory right away. It's about the money. We need to see you before the celebratory fireworks."

Johan tossed the phone aside. So, they were holding back. Making him beg. The real cash was probably in another account that Ali should have given him after yesterday's delivery. No doubt, they enjoyed making him sweat. "Best to head right over," he thought. "Now or never, because if I don't get the money now, I may not see them again. Besides, once everything blows, I can't be seen talking to any of them."

Johan was in such a hurry that he almost walked out the door wearing his boxer shorts. He decided to slow down a tad. He pulled a tall can of brown ale and a slice of stale pizza from the fridge. The beer was to clear some of the hair out of his throat, and the pizza was to calm his growling stomach. Getting dressed was another issue. He had no clean casuals; his shirts stank of sweat, so he pulled a suit out of the closet. The tie and dress shoes he skipped. In the mirror, he looked fine in dim light; tan fall suit, fresh white shirt. But close up, he looked more like an unshaven alcoholic with reddened eyes and a stressed-out expression. The running shoes he'd put on didn't work well either.

"Screw it," he said. He took a last bite of the pizza, picked up his can of ale, and walked out. The faint light in the sky still looked like a bleeding wound to him. Perhaps in younger, happier years, he would have thought it was a beautiful rose. He cursed at a flutter of pigeons as he opened the garage, then he got in his SUV and drove off.

Speeding toward the factory ruins, Johan wished there was more traffic. He wished that because he felt like shooting up with road rage and going after someone. Preferably a wuss that would take the bait, pull over, and argue. In such situations, Johan would

keep his arms firmly at his side and occasionally press forward using the bulk of his torso to knock the man back. Then he would let go with some abuse. It usually worked to bring about a first swing from the sucker that witnesses would see. A swing that would authorize a shit-kicking retaliation. However, today, that wasn't happening; the few drivers he encountered simply got out of his way. Of course, it would have been different if he had been heading into town instead of the other way.

He wondered about leverage. Meaning that though he felt like going ballistic with someone, he didn't feel like warring with Ali or Randy. Not on a day when they were preparing to go out on a suicidal killing spree. Standing there, dough-faced while a laughing Ali played around, refusing to give him the details on how to get the cash did not appeal to him either. Andras was supposed to watch the explosion from some location, but Johan didn't know where that location was. He doubted he'd be able to contact him any time soon, so Ali had to come through. He'd think of something to say, something that would give him an advantage. Finding ways to BS and bluff people was certainly one of his skills; it was just that nothing was coming to mind at the moment.

Something would have to come to mind soon, because the factory was just up the dusty road. He slowed and turned in, thinking that the factory was the perfect residence for the two terrorists. It looked like it had been bombed, and it sat in wasteland. Their home in one of those Middle East sand traps where every building was a bombed-out terrorist nest would be much like it. "Fucking sand crawlers," he muttered as he thought about it.

This morning, to add to the picture of beauty, the two terrorists stood out front of the factory in the weeds by an old, askew doorway. There was now just enough light in the sky to see them, and Johan was surprised to see them there. He jolted the vehicle by braking suddenly and stopping right at the gate. Ali and Randy were walking across the weedy ground toward him, but he didn't wait; he got out, opened the gate a crack, and strolled in to meet them. He could see that they were already dressed for battle, wearing long charcoal-gray coats. They both carried assault rifles, and that did not raise Johan's spirits. Coming here seemed like a bad idea now. It was the easiest place in the world to be killed and forgotten. But he couldn't exactly turn and walk away now, so he kept up his approach and met them on a circular depression of cracked red earth.

Johan put on his largest phony smile. He wondered where they stole the wool coats and black boots, but didn't plan to ask. "Well, well ... you look like two fine gentlemen out for some skeet shooting."

"Yes," Ali said, raising his weapon and pointing it at Johan. "And you look like the clay pigeon."

Johan immediately stepped back and put his hands out. "Please, please. I'm only here to wish you, boys, luck on your mission."

Ali lowered his weapon and grinned.

Randy spoke. "We've been doing some target practice, using home-made suppressors. These guns are fantastic. You just can't miss."

"That's wonderful," Johan said. "I just have one small question to ask."

"Really," Randy said. "It just happens that I also have a small question to ask."

“Okay, shoot,” Johan said. “er, I mean, don’t shoot. What’s the question?”

“We found bugs in the factory. Electronic listening devices. Now we’ve been scratching our heads. It could have been you who planted them. You were the person with the most access.”

A voice in Johan’s head said, “Oh, oh.” He again put his hands up defensively and took another step back. “Surely you don’t suspect me. What possible motive could I have for doing that?”

“We know you didn’t go to the cops,” Randy said, pointing a finger at him. “If you did, we would have already been arrested. There is no personal motive you could have. I think Andras or Jalal could have paid you to do it.”

“Paid me to do it. Now you’re saying Andras has other motives. You’re scaring me.”

“Scaring you,” Ali said. He walked up and stared at Johan closely. He stepped back and looked him up and down like a shark sizing up a meal. He turned away suddenly and looked at Randy. “It wasn’t him. I can tell when someone lies. All I see in his eyes is stupidity.”

Randy nodded, but Johan took offense. It wasn’t stupidity that was passing through his mind, but growing frustration and confusion. The frustration was about money, and if Andras was playing with bugs and running a completely different game, then what? He had played along, thinking of them all as terrorists with a one-track group mind that only thought of blowing things up. But if Andras and the others weren’t in the deal to blow things up, then what were they in it for?

“What about my money?” Johan suddenly blurted it out, throwing his hands up and apart as though the question was of great philosophical importance. Even though he was facing neither Ali nor Randy, but the open field.

It caused Randy to shield his eyes and look across the field to see if anyone was there. And it didn’t impress Ali. “Money, all the unbeliever can think about is money.”

Johan realized he was messing things up. He forced a smile and spoke softly. “You two fine men will be moving on to a higher place later today. But me, I’ll be down here in the shit storm. If the cops start closing in, I might need to run. I’ll need money then, so you should help. Andras left you the account information, didn’t he?”

Randy stared at him stonily. Ali had taken to pacing, and he suddenly turned and lifted his gun. Johan’s eyes widened with terror, and then his cell phone rang. “It is probably Andras,” Johan said. “I’ve been waiting for his call.”

Ali lowered the gun. “Answer it. Don’t hang up before I talk to him.”

“Sure thing,” Johan said, quickly pulling the phone from his pocket and feeling relief when he heard Andras’ reassuring voice. His fright dissipated. Andras would settle all of this, he felt certain of it.

“So are you ready for the big kaboom?” Andras said.

“I will be once a couple of problems are ironed out.”

“Problems, what problems?”

“First, the money. I haven’t received the full payment. And there is another issue. Ali wants to talk to you about something.”

“Ali wants to talk to me. Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m at the factory.”

“You were told to stay the fuck away from there. Never mind, I’m near there anyway. Put Ali on. I want to know what is up.”

Johan passed the phone to Ali. A short conversation ensued. Ali said nothing about the bugs, just that he needed to see Andras right away. There was some agreement, and Ali’s last words were, “Okay, half an hour.”

Johan snatched the phone. “Andras, the money ... remember your promise?”

“Of course, of course. I haven’t forgotten. I called just for that purpose; to give you access.”

“Well, that’s wonderful news,” Johan said, feeling cheered, for two reasons. First, there was the money, but the second reason was that Ali now had his mind on Andras, and it would probably remain fixed that way, meaning he would be able to escape this decrepit place.

“Okay,” Andras said. “First, I want you to step away from those two. Ali has sharp ears, and I don’t want him to hear this.”

“Sure thing,” Johan said, doing as he was told.

“I’m going to switch you to a recorded message that will give you what you need. You ready?”

“Sure, sure, go ahead with it.”

“All right. I want you to hold for five seconds, then press nine on your number pad, and the recording will play.”

“Okay, got it,” Johan said. He took the phone from his ear and held it out in front of him. He was smiling broadly now and silently counting to five. He noticed both Randy and Ali staring at him stonily, but he ignored them. At the count of five, he hit the nine and got his money’s worth.

What Ali and Randy saw happen was not cute. Though both of them had broad experience with death, it was usually not right-in-your-face death. Even a beheading seemed distant and clean compared to this ... because when Johan hit the nine, the entire back of his skull blew off. It did not explode in all directions but straight up in a geyser of gore, while his face remained intact for a moment before collapsing like it had been a rubber mask. It was so unexpected that neither Randy nor Ali reacted until a splatter of gore descended on their faces, and then they staggered back, cursing as Johan’s body fell to the ground.

Ali dropped his gun, threw his arms in the air, and shouted, “Fuck!”

Randy remained still, but his bloody face contorted with hideous rage. Impotent rage because, unless he wanted to kick Johan’s twitching body, he had no one to take it out on. A few moments passed, then Randy spoke to Ali in a voice seething with hatred. “I

told Johan there was no explosive planted in the back of his neck. He kept asking. I told him that because you are an explosives expert and you said it wasn't possible."

Ali threw his hands up again, and then he shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it.

"I'm going inside to get some towels to clean this blood off. Wait here and try not to fuck anything up before I get back."

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Seeing Johan's head burst had not been included in Joe's assessment of possible turns of events. Fireworks were in the cards, but Johan's head becoming a Roman candle put the Joker as the first card played. Joe had been watching Johan directly through his field glasses when it happened. His eyes did not linger on the ghastly sight; he immediately panned the field looking for a sniper that he was sure could not be there because he had already scanned the field many times. When he found nothing but wind-swept bushes and weeds, he looked at Ali and Randy to see if they had spotted anything. They were not looking for a shooter, so he knew that something weird had happened. Joe lowered the glasses but did not rub his eyes, which were tired from constantly watching the factory. He had initially hoped they would stay inside the factory and be finished off when they called in the explosion. Randy was now going inside temporarily, but it looked like they were going to hang around outside and then go on a killing spree with automatic rifles. It meant Joe had to stop them, and since his weapon was only a handgun, that would prove difficult, if not fatal. The SIG Sauer P320 semi-automatic pistol with a seventeen-round clip was a solid gun, but not a match for the terrorists' automatic rifles in any direct shootout. He would have to hit them by surprise.

Ali was pacing about like a nervous junkie, and with gore on his face. Perhaps the taste of blood had him hungry for more. Joe took a long look at Johan's corpse, which had fallen face down. Johan's shoulders remained intact; part of his upper back was missing, along with the back of his head. It was hard to figure out. He didn't take Johan for a suicidal type, but how would he have some form of explosive taped on the back of his neck unless he did it himself? Joe knew it was perhaps a mystery he wouldn't solve, and it was convenient. He'd been wondering what exactly to do about Johan, and that was no longer a problem now that he was dead. It certainly solved Gerard Cusac's dilemma of being saddled with a criminal personnel director. It also cut Cusac Demolitions' ties to terrorism, as without Johan, none of the others had a way inside.

Randy emerged carrying some towels and a discreet carry case for the tactical rifles. The nylon carry case would hold the two weapons once the pins were removed, breaking them in half. Only someone who knew of such cases would realize they were carrying weapons.

The two men splashed their faces with bottled water and toweled off the gore. Randy washed down the front of his stained coat and then picked up the case. Joe watched as Randy pulled some ammo boxes from the case and looked them over. He had enough ammo for a serious killing spree, and with those weapons, it meant many victims. The case indicated they weren't going to jump out of a car and start shooting. They had a

location picked with a spot where they could prepare the weapons, then emerge in a crowded area and thrive off the terror of people fleeing as they picked them off.

The location of their shooting spree would be somewhere other than downtown and the south side of town. Earlier, while checking news reports in the van, Joe had heard bulletins about two small explosions. One bomb had gone off in a trashcan at 2 am. A second bomb had gone off in a mailbox near City Hall at 3 am. Two people had been injured. Joe figured they must've planted those smaller bombs a short time after planting the big ones, when he didn't have tail on them. Since the news reported a heavy police presence at City Hall, speculation was that a note had been delivered threatening a larger bombing there. Two bombings also meant that the city command bunker would now be fully staffed with emergency personnel, all of them unaware that it was in fact the Liberty Import Complex across the street that was supposed to blow, and bury them under rubble and a few hundred dead bodies.

Joe had canceled the feature downtown explosion. Now the liberty bombs would destroy a derelict factory, and anyone unlucky enough to be in it or near it. This new issue, the shooting spree, presented difficulties. He had assumed the bad guys would gather in the factory to detonate the bombs. The location would keep them far from the mayhem and police investigation. Now it was certain that Randy and Ali were ready for a suicide run, and the others were hiding out somewhere, most likely in that hidden location somewhere inside Wizard Waste Management that he had been unable to find.

Their choice of vehicle for this final run appeared to be Johan's Cadillac SUV, because as Joe watched, Randy strolled outside the fence. Using the key he'd grabbed from Johan's corpse, he started the vehicle and drove it inside to an apron of dry clay a bit north of where they had been. It would be harder to watch them there because the area had many mounds of trash. At some earlier date, before the fence had gone up, this place had been a spot for illegal dumping. Randy parked the vehicle partially out of view by a mound, and Ali walked over to him and stashed one of the guns in the back. He played with the other gun for a bit, then set it back inside the vehicle. They lit up smokes and sat on a couple of huge pieces of broken concrete projecting from one mound. Joe could see them engaging in casual conversation, and Ali had taken out a cellphone, waving it about as he talked. Zeroing in on the phone, Joe saw it was an old, battered Samsung, and he was certain it was programmed with the detonation number.

Soon they would make a call. They would definitely want to do it before driving off on their kill run to a location that would no doubt not be in the chaos zone, but somewhere where they would have the element of surprise. They would not worry about the police because they would expect all of them to rush to the scene of the explosion.

Another opportunity might not present itself, so Joe got up, dusted off his trousers, and prepared to move. His plan was to simply cut around behind them and take them by surprise while they were unarmed. He had to run past part of the factory, so he had to hope they didn't hit the detonator at exactly that time. They were far off, but he still had to move quietly. He went down into a ditch. It had once been a huge concrete culvert, but the top of it had now collapsed, with a trickle of runoff running along the bottom part that remained. He came up out of it and ran through pines, then scrub, to the spot where he'd cut a neat section out of the fence. He stopped to look even though they

were likely still at the front of the factory. Being certain of their location was important because for them, it was only a short walk and turn through the collapsed walls to where they could see around back.

It looked clear, Joe prepared to run, but for some reason paused to study a hawk circling over the factory. A movement in his peripheral vision made him look left. He immediately pulled in behind the bushes. The front grille and headlights of a car protruded from the bushes by the fence about a hundred yards away. When he'd scouted the factory, he had found the remains of an old dirt road there. Mostly grown over now, it was barely visible and had been another way into the factory before the huge fence had been put up.

This signaled big trouble. Had this vehicle crept in at night when he wasn't looking, or had it just come in now? He decided it had just come in because he'd had a good watch set up and hadn't seen anyone arrive. That particular spot, though, had not been visible from his hidden location. He wondered who it could be and how many there might be. It was unlikely they knew about him, because if they did, he would probably have already been ambushed.

He checked his surroundings to make sure no ambush was currently underway. He saw no one. A few minutes passed; Joe became very nervous. He had to move in on Randy and Ali right away and take them out. Quietly, he began creeping through the bushes, working his way around to the vehicle. He didn't like this at all. It flustered him. If gunfire were exchanged, Randy and Ali would be alerted.

Cold sweat and grime from the dusty bushes had stuck to his brow. A break in the pines gave him a view of the car from the rear. A compact Ford, an E-Z rental car according to the sticker. It was empty, and the driver's side door was open. A shadow moved by some bushes, and Joe brought his gun up. This person was twenty feet away and approaching the fence. It was a woman, her back to him, and she hadn't seen him. She was dressed in gray khaki pants and a similar jacket in a darker shade of gray. She moved catlike as she swiftly went up and over the fence.

The cut and sheen of her dark hair, and a brief glimpse of her in profile, told Joe it was the phony property manager from the Liberty Import Complex. This woman was like a chameleon. She'd looked natural at the airport as a delicate Muslim woman in a hijab, and convincing as a businesswoman at the Liberty. Joe knew this was the real her, a stalker, killer, and heartless terrorist. But what was off was that she was stalking her own men. She was essentially doing the same thing as him, coming from the back to creep around for an ambush.

She was also very confident about it because when Joe peeked out again, she was running gracefully across the field. He couldn't see a weapon. His guess was that she had a handgun and a knife. And a lot of trust in her abilities if she was going to take them out that way.

It was clear, so Joe checked the car and found nothing. It was just an empty rental. Standing by the hood, he looked left and saw a perfect observation spot by a large maple tree fifty yards away. He instantly knew she had driven around the location and found that spot. From there, she would have seen her two pals doing some target

practice, but her view angle would not have revealed Joe's hidden location. "Lucky thing," he thought.

Glancing around a tree trunk, he saw her going all the way around the factory at the south end. Not Joe's choice for a surprise attack, but she must have judged it a better point of approach. As soon as the factory blocked her view of the field, Joe swung up and over the fence and sprinted for the north end of the factory. As he ran, he wondered why she was doing it this way. If she wanted to ambush her own comrades, why didn't she just drive up, play friendly, and then pull her gun and shoot them? He concluded it was probably the time and that they were armed with superior weapons. They would wonder why she was showing so early in the morning and immediately become suspicious. Once tipped off, they would be deadly. A sniper rifle would have been the best way to take them out. She was probably unable to get one on short notice.

So someone had ordered a cleanup and, in a hurry, sent her in even before the detonation. He guessed that maybe Andras sent her in to kill them and grab the detonator. He could let her do the detonation, and then he would probably shoot her when she showed up to collect. It was also possible she would shoot Randy and keep Ali temporarily alive if there was a special number only he knew to call in the explosion. More likely, he had the number programmed into his cell and only had to hit it to detonate.

The shadow of a broken wall covered Joe. He caught his breath as quietly as possible, then began to creep ahead. Edging around a busted concrete silo, he cut left of some thorn bushes and crouched beside a rusting auto hulk. He was off to their left and behind Ali and Randy. The two of them were strolling about not far from the main gate. They were smoking and talking like they had been all morning. They couldn't get too many last cigarettes. He could not see the woman, but if she had planned an ambush, she would emerge shortly. There would never be a better opportunity.

Thick clusters of tall brambles, dead, dusty, and crisp but still full of burs, grew beside the auto wreck. Joe noticed a bunch of burs stuck to his pants. This factory was not friendly territory, and if he wanted to be a belonging ghost, he would have to accept a coating of its filth. The thistles had been so thick on the run-in that some of them had jabbed right through his pants to sting his upper ankles and shins. Approaching the factory was always like approaching death, as its foul odors assaulted the nostrils. Nothing about this operation had been rosy. The stakeout and this sucked, and as he tossed a handful of burs aside, he knew it was going to suck more.

Like an evil sprite sprung from a cheap haunted house, the lovely lady shot out of a busted second-floor window in that badly damaged south section of the factory. Randy and Ali were strolling toward the factory and her as she appeared. She hit the ground at a run, drawing her automatic pistol and opening fire.

Randy and Ali were not armed as the guns were in Johan's SUV twenty yards away. Instant surprise appeared on their faces, but their other reactions differed. Ali dove left into the weeds with incredible speed while Randy's mouth fell open. "Marnia," Randy said, as though he felt the need to name his executioner.

Randy did not get so much as another dumbstruck moment before the bullets hit. However, the shots missed the center of mass, one ripping into his right shoulder area, spinning him half around as he was knocked to the ground.

Joe both gained and lost respect for the woman. That she could hit a target while running was good, but that she would do it that way was stupid. It was as if she were trying to incorporate moves from an action movie into a real assassination.

Randy was down, mostly hidden by some rocks and deep weeds, and Ali came up from his roll on the ground, running and with something in his right hand, a piece of metal that looked like an old rusted hubcap, and he threw it hard. It distracted Marnia's aim as she instinctively cringed slightly. She fired, and the bullets pinged off the flying hubcap as Ali dived and rolled again and disappeared behind a mound of rubbish and earth.

Randy, bleeding profusely, now rose to his feet. Marnia had been attempting to focus on Ali and became flustered when Randy caught her eye. She shifted her attention completely to him and marched forward, lifting the gun and firing.

"Die! Die! You idiot!" she shouted.

Randy, whose mouth had been opening to say something, didn't get to make any last terrorist statement. The bullets ripped into his neck just below the collarbone, and blood spurting out at an odd angle as he stumbled backward into the weeds. In the same way, most of Randy's own victims in foreign lands had gone down; Randy also went down. A bomb didn't take him out, but it was via the same unexpected violence created by a person who could be described as politically and religiously insane.

Joe remained undecided about whether to jump into the fray. The hateful grimace on Marnia's face stunned him so much that he forgot he was partially exposed. It didn't matter. She didn't see him because she looked the other way, trying to get a fast take on where Ali had gone. He appeared running and diving again. This time, he made it to the cover of the mound and Johan's SUV.

Marnia sprinted forward, knowing she had to reach Ali before he accessed a weapon. Joe knew it would be close because Ali was extremely fast, and he had left the weapons unpacked on the SUV's back seat. Joe saw Ali move from the front of the mound and low along the side of the SUV, but Marnia's angle of view left her blind. She had nearly closed the gap when Ali came out from the rear of the SUV at a leap, rifle at ready, and in the same moment, they both fired. Ali missed, and Marnia's single shot winged the side of his head.

Marnia could have finished him, but that didn't happen because she held her fire while he tripped on lumpy ground and went down hard. The fall appeared to have aided Marnia by giving Ali another blow to the head. He was not getting up. He remained face down, his outstretched arm holding the gun.

Marnia went down in a squat and took some deep breaths. She stood back up, and she stalked forward, then stopped, looking down at Ali. He wasn't dead. He was stirring. He let go of the gun and rolled over on his back, looking up at her. Ali sat up slowly; the bullet had winged his temple, drawing some blood. He was obviously groggy. Clay grime created rouge on his face.

“Let’s make this ending humane, big man,” Marnia said. “I know you have the phone detonator, so we’re going to get this done. You’re going to call in the explosion right now. But that’s the end of the story. We no longer have a use for you.”

“You are a Western pig!” Ali spat bitterly. “No Muslim woman speaks to a man like that.”

“I spit on you just like I spit on Westerners. I am an Arab but not a follower of your filthy version of Islam. There are many women like me. We will destroy the West and dominate for our own reasons. You men are so easy to fool. Anyone can get inside, play along with your macho idiocy, and kill you when the time comes. All of the suffering is worth it, just to watch men like you die.”

Ali shook his head in both disgust and disbelief at this Arab feminist rebellion. He stood up slowly on shaky legs. His eyes cleared and radiated pure hate. “There are others who have to die. Not just me. The cellphone is in my pocket. Promise you won’t shoot before I call it in.”

“Sure, that’s what I said, isn’t it. I want you to call it in, thinking stupidly until the end that you will get a reward of female flesh after death. Get out the phone. Do it and then be dead in a ditch, because that’s where you go when you die.”

Joe knew Ali was going to do just that, and then he would charge for Marnia on the chance of getting her and avoiding that likely fate of just being dead in a ditch. A quick calculation of the bombs’ location told Joe he could not allow that to happen. They were too close to the factory, and since Andras also had incendiary explosives planted, the blast would be doubly fierce. Being incinerated seemed about as wonderful an idea as being dead in a ditch, so Joe lifted his gun, figuring on two quick shots to end it for both of them.

But those shots were never fired because someone else fired first. This shot was not silenced; the sound cracked in the cool air, and the shooter was Lena. Joe took in a number of things in about the same instant. The first was Marnia’s right hand being severed as the shot directly hit her weapon, causing it to explode in an odd way. The second image was Lena, dressed all in black, silhouetted against the white light beaming from a portion of the factory’s broken south wall. Third, he saw Ali drop to his knees and raise his hands.

Then a blow glanced off the side of Joe’s head and crashed into his shoulder. He lost his gun in the weeds and nearly lost consciousness with it. He went to his knees and grimaced. Pain electrified his brain and shoulder, and for some moments, he could not recall where he was or what was happening. Screaming ... he heard a woman howling in ghastly pain and raised his head to look up. Another voice, behind him, warned him not to move, and he knew he’d been cracked over the head with a gun.

His vision wavered as if he were underwater. From his knees, he could see Ali with his hands up. The screamer was Marnia, now on her knees, holding the bleeding stub of her right hand under her left armpit as Lena calmly walked up.

Lena’s face was bloodlessly pale, lean, and her expression cruel. She wore a black leather jacket, a black blouse, black jeans, and black hiking boots. Her Springfield handgun looked unnaturally large in her small porcelain hand, but Joe knew she had full control of that gun.

She wouldn't miss if he tried to move; he made no effort to attract her attention. Bile rose in his throat, but he swallowed it. If he could have, he would have vomited it all up. Emptied his guts because he was sick of ruthless, aggressive women and shit terrorists.

"Fuck you! Fuck you!" Marnia screamed as Lena stared tight-lipped at her from a few paces away.

"No, fuck you," Lena said calmly. "Your orders were to wait at the airport hotel, then leave on your plane. You did not obey our orders. You betrayed us to someone else."

"She is an unbeliever," Ali sputtered. "She killed Randy. She blasphemed the prophet. Shoot her!"

Marnia was losing blood fast. She could only moan and stare. She was about to pass out.

"Shoot her?" Lena said. "Why? I would rather enjoy watching her die this way."

Ali's eyes flickered dangerously. Joe felt like saying, 'Oh-oh.' Then, to the surprise of the others, Ali shot forward, fast like a rattlesnake. He knocked Marnia's bleeding arm aside and came up on top of her. His eyes were crazed. He didn't care whether Lena shot him in the back of the head or not. He began to pummel Marnia, and then he seized a rock and began bashing her. Joe could see it all, and it was grotesque. It also threw him off. He had been about to attempt to disarm the man behind him, whom he knew was Jalal, but Ali's obscene murder technique distracted him.

Blood and red clay dripped on Ali's face. He remained on top of Marnia's corpse but had risen up on his knees. He began to weep like an idiot, throwing his hands out and up as if he was showing his handiwork to Allah. Lena, who had been about to shoot him, lowered her weapon as if enjoying this pathetic scene. Her stare was cold and full of fascination; the sort of fascination a serial killer would have while studying such things.

Jalal jabbed Joe hard in the back with his gun. "Move, and you're dead," he said quietly to Joe. Then louder, to Lena, he said, "Andras should be here any moment. I think a long session with this guy is going to be needed. We need to know why he is here. We need to know who he talked to."

Ali seemed hopeless and temporarily harmless, so Lena put her gaze on Joe. The cruelty had left her gaze, but there was no warmth in it. She was studying him like he was some form of interesting bug. She definitely had no fear of him. She did not see him as a threat. "It's that idiot private eye. My info on him is that he works alone. We'll question him anyway, but I think it will turn out that we just have to bury him to bury anything he knows."

Joe decided to play for time. "Look. I don't know anything. I don't know why you people are killing one another. I was only in this because of Johan. He didn't make his payments to his ex-wife. I was supposed to follow him, find a way to extort the money from him."

"That sounds like pure bullshit," Lena said, but her eyes said she might believe it.

Jalal laughed. Joe felt his hot breath on his neck. "Joe boy might even be telling the truth," Jalal said. "Or part of it. I checked on this guy, too. People say he is one crazy fuck of an investigator. He was probably going to try to extort money from us."

A noisy crow flew overhead. Its cawing seemed ugly in Joe's hearing. It was like another bad omen. The sound of a truck rattling up the road followed, and Joe didn't have to turn to look; he knew it would be Andras arriving.

"Watch them," Jalal said as he walked out of the weeds and up the road to let Andras in the gate.

"Joe boy," Lena said. "Walk over here real slow and stand by Ali."

Joe did what he was told, though standing by Ali and a battered corpse wasn't his idea of postcard perfect. As he walked over, he saw something, but was careful not to show any surprise that might tip Lena off. What he saw was Randy. They had assumed him dead, but that was not the case. He was down in the weeds but ten feet closer than he had been a while back. Joe figured he had crawled closer while Ali was doing his thing with Marnia. It looked like Randy may have passed back out, but there was a slim chance that he was about to create some form of distraction. Joe's eyes went to his fallen gun, six feet away in the weeds. Too far to reach with Lena focused on him. She could kill him in an instant. He needed either Jalal or Andras right beside him to make a move, but they were talking over by the gate.

Lena's gaze made Joe very uncomfortable. In it, he could see that she was thinking about taking him out right away. One quick shot and it would be over. He decided to get her mind off that idea.

"I would be concerned if I were you," Joe said.

"Concerned about what, detective man?" Her eyes went to Ali, like maybe Joe was talking about him, but Ali was going through a phase where, still on his knees, he had his hands over his face and was softly weeping. Though the vicious murder had not sickened Lena, this sight of Ali did. She wrinkled her nose like she smelled something bad.

"Not him," Joe said. He nodded toward Andras and Jalal and their discussion at the gate. "I see a lot of talking over there. I see Jalal nodding towards you. I would wonder what they are up to."

Lena sneered. "They wouldn't dare cross me," she said, and then she glanced at the gate again and grew impatient. The natural female distrust of men and their side conspiracies clicked in. "Yo!" she yelled. "We're waiting over here!"

That ended the conversation. Jalal opened the gate, and they both walked in. Andras did not appear to be armed, and he was dressed very casually in pale-brown linen pants, loafers, a white polo shirt, and a brown windbreaker. He wore binoculars around his neck and could almost be taken as a birdwatcher rather than a terrorist. But that would be at a distance, because up close, his facial features revealed him as too thuggish to be any bird watcher. Joe found the oddity of it striking. He knew Andras had planned to watch the explosion, not of the factory but of the Liberty. At least he had until the situation changed. Andras was hard to figure out; a man who would think watching a

murderous disaster was about as casual as watching a fly ball down at the stadium. Perhaps he had brought some wrapped dogs and fries along to snack on during the event.

As Lena's eyes went to Andras, Joe's quickly went to Randy. He was moving slightly. Joe wondered how long it would be before they noticed him, and then he studied Lena again and thought it sad that such an attractive woman could be such a rotten bitch.

No matter how he dressed, Andras carried an air of authority. This was despite his wheezy voice. He was definitely not pleasant to look at, yet he had a strange aura that people noticed. It was creepy. A tarantula would carry a similar aura, and no matter how you dressed it up, it would still be a venomous character. This morning, Andras' mood seemed to be one of unnatural calm at a time when being pissed off would be the norm. Perhaps it was the calm of the snake before it rattles and strikes. He immediately went to work downplaying things by saying, "It is unfortunate that events have not gone as planned." He looked to Ali. Ali had taken his hands from his face and was looking up like a lost hound dog. "It appears our friend Marnia has betrayed us, but it was to another Islamic faction and not to intelligence agencies. It doesn't matter. We are still going ahead with the main event, and history will be made today. Ali, you are still going to call in the explosion, but I have decided that you are going to come with us to the observation post so you can watch it with us."

"I killed her. I killed Marnia," Ali said stupidly as he slowly stood up.

Bloody, dirty, and sweaty, Ali looked like a filthy mongrel, and one that might again turn rabid and attack. Joe saw Lena raise one eyebrow and give Andras the evil eye. She obviously felt that this new concern for Ali not only made no sense but was downright foolish.

"Hey, wait just a second," she said. "You sure you want to take Ali with us?"

"Why not?" Andras said. "He can call it in, then we will let him take a gun and drop him where he can hijack a car and go on his run. He will die a martyr, gun in hand, receiving full honors in the media for this strike against the infidels."

Jalal snickered at how silly those words sounded coming from Andras. Especially when he knew Ali would not be receiving any credit for the bombing. Over by the fence, they had discussed releasing some info that would paint him as an unhinged extremist who saw the bombing and decided it was a call to go out killing. Despite Jalal's confidence, he had not noticed that Randy wasn't quite dead.

Ali's eyes had brightened, and he grinned. He obviously liked this new turn of events. Joe figured that Ali's blood lust and poor logic in things not involving killing were preventing him from realizing that Andras was just using him as a dupe. Joe also figured it was hard to say what a dupe was among these people, as they changed plans so often that anyone could become a dupe overnight.

"I like it," Ali said. "But I'm worried now. Marnia might have blocked the release of our video."

"If she tried she failed," Andras said. "Trust me. Your people are in full control overseas. Everything is taken care of."

Ali nodded slowly as his brain attempted to reason it out. Finally, he seemed satisfied. Lena obviously didn't like the situation, but it became clear she was going to tolerate it. Jalal shrugged his shoulders while exchanging a glance with Andras, and Joe felt butterflies in his stomach. The conversation was certainly now going to turn to him, and they would have no further use for him.

"So what about this Holiday guy?" Jalal said. "I still say finding him here is not good."

"True," Andras said. "It was rather unexpected. We have two choices. Finish him now or hold him. We could take him to the recycling plant and use specialized equipment to determine exactly what he knows and what he's been doing. It is more convenient; the big claw and the compactor are my standard tools for prying people like him. Perhaps we should take a quick vote on this."

"We don't have time to play with him. I say we erase him now," Lena said. She did a chop in the empty air with her left hand. "We close this deal this morning. The whole thing. I'm certain that whatever this amateur snoop knows will be buried with him. He's just a lone operator who got into this for revenge and personal gain."

"Let me think about it for just a moment," Jalal said. He began to shuffle nervously about. He turned and strolled a few steps toward the road, and then he shuffled back and said, "Umm, sounds about right. We do him now. We simply don't know how much chaos might break out once the bomb goes off. Better to be rid of this guy."

Lena looked to Andras like she wanted him to give the okay to shoot. Joe was about to duck left, seize Jalal, and use him for a shield, and then a grunt changed the situation entirely. Randy was rising to his feet in the weeds to the left of Lena. He was barely alive and a mess of blood, filth, and debris. He had one thick finger up, pointing toward Ali. Randy was somewhat delirious, and his slit eyes appeared to be blinded, but he could see just enough to recognize people. He spoke Ali's name, though his voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. "Ali, Aleee ... remember what I told you. They tricked us. Not just Marnia, all of them. Do it. Kill them, kill them now."

Andras, Lena, and Jalal watched this new development with mild surprise. Randy wielded some form of terrorist authority, as if they were obligated to allow him his last words. Ali's eyes grew wide and troubled. He was seeing and hearing the revelation of a ghost. This was definitely not part of anyone's plan, but Randy was unarmed and posed no physical threat, so no one took action immediately. There was an extended moment as Randy stood on shaky legs and coughed up some blood, then Lena turned her gun on him and pumped three bullets into him. These were fast shots, and she swung to take out Ali next, but it was too late. Both Joe and Ali had moved lightning fast, and Joe was lucky, being partly shielded by Ali as they dove behind a mound. Lena pressed forward but stubbed her right toe on a rock as she fired two shots and missed. Jalal didn't have his gun because Ali had managed to knock it from his hand before diving.

Joe and Ali rolled up and took off at a sprint, and Joe knew that neither of them had much of a chance. Lena would regain her footing and step over to gain firm, clear shots. It wasn't likely that she would miss. Joe knew the shot would come at any moment. He felt suddenly as light as rising air, as though he were running into oblivion, then he heard a shout. It was Ali's voice as he yelled, "Speed dial!"

Tripping, going down rough in stony ground and thistles, Joe realized what Ali had just done. Slightly dazed, he rolled and glanced up from the weeds. As expected, Lena had positioned herself to target them. She had the gun ready. Posed with one knee slightly bent, she prepared to fire the final shots. But she didn't fire immediately. A disappointed expression formed on her face because Ali was standing and no longer fleeing. He faced her, holding a cell phone up defiantly, as he waited for her to cut him down.

Joe knew speed dial meant Ali had called in the detonation.

Speed dial meant Lena was pissed because she now believed she wouldn't get to witness the dramatic sight of the Liberty Import Complex taking a few hundred people down to a cruel grave.

Speed dial meant she would see fireworks even though she didn't expect them, and from a much closer perspective.

Speed dial meant they would all experience fireworks, because the decrepit factory was about to erupt like a volcano.

Joe had pictured it before, all of the softening concrete, rotten wood, and rusty metal in a splintering explosion. The memory sent him rolling over flat to the ground, hugging the earth for a moment as he waited for the shot in the back, but the bullet didn't come. Instead, it was like the entire universe had been suddenly nuked. A shock wave ripped off the top of the mound next to Joe, and he was suddenly rolling and tumbling while his ears and brain screamed with pain. The second shock wave carried him right up into the air. He did not hear the explosions with his ears; his entire body became a tuning fork conducting the boom. When that shock ended, he drifted into a strange limbo. Though blinded to his surroundings, he had a strange hallucination that carried a hellish visual aspect of fire. Sudden darkness followed, and when he regained consciousness, he was on the ground and coughing bitterly. His eyes stung, he couldn't see, and his ears were filled with a high buzzing noise.

After a few moments, he got to his knees. He kept his hands cupped over his stinging eyes, only pulling them away to suddenly vomit. His eyes soon filled with tears, and his vision slowly cleared. The buzzing began to diminish, so he got up, and his memory flooded back to him. He immediately went back to his knees, then fell flat and rolled onto his back. He did not stand because he did not want to be visible. If any of the others had been lucky, survived, and recovered, he did not want to be seen by them and attacked.

The air around him was smoky, and a wind was blowing in and lifting it. He waited, listening for a short time, but heard only the sounds of the blazing factory remains. He got up and saw an enormous dust cloud. It drifted away from him, filling the sky and obscuring the sun. Dense black smoke from the humongous ruin of the factory was rising and feeding the cloud. Nothing of any significance remained standing. All had been turned to rubble, and the tops were blown off the many rubbish and dirt mounds. Uprooted weeds covered a patch of bare ground next to him. Joe didn't see any sign of human movement. The area around him looked like the biggest plane in the world had crashed, strewing its debris everywhere to create a field of trash and junk of all sizes.

Hungry flames created hisses, sighs, and occasional snaps and crackles at the hot center of the smoking ruin. Joe knew it would burn all day. He knew his van would be intact. It was off the other way and not buried in the smoke cloud. If he could just stumble to it and get out of this place, the deal would be over. He'd been lucky, and he believed that perhaps the others had not been so fortunate. They had been standing and would have been open to the blast. Most likely, they had been torn apart by flying splinters and debris. Turning, he shielded his eyes from the glare and spotted one of the others. It was Jalal ... what was left of him. A huge concrete piece from the factory walls had blown out this far and landed. A jagged swath of metal protruded from it, and it held Jalal's impaled corpse in a sitting posture.

Joe stumbled the fifteen yards to Jalal's corpse, then he turned his head from it to avoid being sick again. In doing so, he spotted a bloody torso and some black cloth and guessed that he'd found a piece of Lena. This time, he did get sick, going to his knees and dry heaving. He didn't stay down long. He heard a gruesome moan and got up, picking his way through the debris toward it. It took some moments, but he found Andras. The blast had impacted his entire body into the remains of one of the mounds. His arms and legs were broken, twisted like pipe cleaners, and embedded in the clay. A mask of blood was all that remained of his face. As Joe watched, he heard a death rattle and saw blood bubble from an orifice.

Shaking his head with disgust, he tripped, caught himself, and stood bent over with his hands on his knees. Oozing red clay caked his pants, and he felt the sting of the breeze on many small cuts on the back of his neck. If he got any weaker, he would collapse. He decided he'd seen enough. It was time to make an exit. The wind had shifted some, and the smoke cloud was now moving his way slowly. He wanted to get to the van and get away clean, so he started walking and coughing. It was more like filth than smoke in the air, and he wasn't in much more than wisps of it. Its odor and taste were like a monster had been cremated nearby. Clouds of smoke continuously rose from the remains of the foundation like a pit had been opened from hell, and when Joe saw someone walking out of that cloud of smoke, he was certain he was seeing a mirage.

The mirage did not vanish. It gained clarity and became more defined. It was definitely a man approaching, carrying something in his right hand. The man was as dark as the smoke, almost like a ghoul.

Joe should have immediately realized who it was, but he did not. It did not occur to him until he heard a voice. It was hoarse, but clear and strong. "Unbeliever, I am coming for you, coming to see you to die!"

The words caused Joe's skin to crawl. Ali had to be dead, must be dead. Yet this was no ghoul returning from the grave. Islamic extremists like Ali did not return from the grave; they returned from Hell. With the power of demons. And that power showed as Ali marched out of the smoke with a shank of metal in his hand, on a mission to kill.

Joe spotted a board at his feet, large enough to use as a club. He picked it up as Ali closed in. Joe swung first, hitting the pipe length in Ali's upraised right hand. The wood shattered to rot, and the pipe flew into the smoke. Disarming Ali saved Joe from a brutal hit, but it did not stop him. He came on strong, taking Joe down on the charred ground and knocking the wind out of him. Ali seized a piece of cinder block, held it up, but did

not strike. Instead, he breathed angry words through his yellowed teeth. "It is not some of you people; it is all of you people. None of you can be trusted. Not even the ones that are supposed to be Muslims and working for the holy cause. But you, you are the worst. You are an infidel who interfered with and blocked our sacred mission. You will be buried for it. You will not stop us. I will escape. More people will die. The job will be done. Allah will be served."

Joe managed to suck in some foul air. Ali's blackened face swam above him like a hideous mask with eyes that saw beyond him, saw something else other than him.

"Who are you to talk about trust?" Joe said. "You say you will bury me, well, that's your solution to everything, isn't it?"

Ali's eyes were blinded by the madness of extremism. He began to mumble the shahada. "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah...." He repeated it, and his voice trailed, then regained strength. "You will say it just as I say it, or you will die. Repeat it as I speak it. There is no God but Allah...."

Ali's breath was rotten. Blackened and dirty, he reeked of death. The foul scents of the explosion seemed like an extension of his body odor. Looking up into the creased face of the madman, Joe felt his weakness vanish as adrenaline from both fear and anger flooded his brain. He said the only words that came to mind. "You fucking stink!"

And before Ali could strike, he lifted up strong and fast and head-butted him. It was a solid hit that dazed Ali just long enough for Joe to throw him off and rise. Ali rolled quickly to his feet, struck out, and missed. He dropped his piece of cinder block, and they ended up grappling, then tumbling through the rubbish, debris, and powdered filth. They pummeled each other with blows and staggered about in a long, slow boxing match. Blow by blow, Joe slowly beat Ali back and down. Blood pouring from his lower lip and partially blinded, Ali made an aggressive final push, stepping forward, throwing some wild punches until Joe's hard right connected with a solid blow to the jaw. Ali went down and out.

Hunched over, hands on his knees, sucking hard for air, Joe tried to catch his breath. The exhaustion seemed endless, like it would defeat him, and he would collapse. Slowly it passed, and he stood up straight and spat out a mouthful of bloody saliva. It was like the taste of the stinking terrorist had invaded his stomach. Not even a shower would help unless he could find a way to cleanse his innards.

Time had passed; Joe was surprised no emergency vehicles had responded to the explosion. It was far out, but there still should have been some response. He still had time to get away, but the lousy terrorist probably wasn't dead. He decided to take care of that problem, reached down, and picked up a chunk of red brick. As he looked to Ali, a gunshot cracked. It crushed Ali's skull like an egg.

Dropping the brick, turning slowly, Joe faced the man who walked out of the smoke. He took form as Special Agent Jason Kufner. The shot had been from his handgun. Kufner was dressed almost like a hunter in tan pants, boots, and a jacket with many pockets. Today, he had a neat haircut and a partial shave, and he looked almost like another mirage. He did not appear to belong in this filthy place. It was as if he had somehow

been beamed in. But if so, Jason Kufner had not arrived from a happy place; his expression revealed grave disappointment.

“I see you looking around, Holiday. You think the cavalry is going to come. Sorry, but that isn’t going to happen because another small bomb just went off downtown to keep them busy. I know because I planted it. The police also got a call about a demolition to occur out here. Sure, they will all be out here soon enough, but only after I have notified them. Only after I have finished with you.”

Joe’s expression mirrored Kufner’s disappointment. “I guess hoping for one of you guys to be a good guy was hoping for too much. Kufner, you are one lousy asshole. Working with terrorists and aiding them even after they are dead. They blew it Kufner. You blew it. Your team or partners, whatever they are, are dead.”

“Team, partners ... Holiday, you disrespect me. They never knew about me. They never knew we were controlling them.”

“I see. An intelligence agency set up. A false flag. Why? Nothing good can come out of this. You and your people are crazier than mad Ali and his friend. What about Newport? Where is she?”

“Newport ... she is running the show downtown. She is just another dupe. Thinks she is saving the world. My people, Holiday, are people you will never see or know.”

“If I see them, I will kill them. I have no respect for traitors who work with the terrorist enemy.”

Kufner wagged his gun toward Ali’s corpse. “There is nothing else those people are good for. They are made to be used. That is why I love Islam. It fills the planet with murderers who think God sent them. Murderers who have been tailor-made to be used for our special purposes.”

“Oh, I see. There is a divine power you worship called your own greedy purposes.”

“There is no divine power. There is no God. So tell me, Holiday, who do you think the higher power should be? Should it be stupid fucking Muslim terrorists that we can arm and manipulate at will? How about Andras and his worldwide network of Satanist morons? Do you think we would allow those snake suckers to be anything more than a creepy minority? The answer is that we don’t give any real or lasting power to any of those lunatics. Muslims, Satanists, it doesn’t matter. We gained control of them and their money a long time ago. You should understand that genuine deep, security-state controllers are not terrorists, fools, Satanists, or religious extremists. We are the true forces of law and order. We are the police force of the technocracy. For this world to work, the tiers of power must be put under our full control. We do it by setting up surveillance on everyone. We leave no one living any more than an illusion of freedom. We leave no one clean enough to escape our blackmail. Hell, we set them up all the time and then use them. People like you, Holiday, have never been important enough for us to look at. You were simply off our radar and of no use to us anyway. Unfortunately, we made a big mistake in this case. Now you’ve fucked this whole operation up. You have caused a major problem. You have caused chaos and blind luck to win.”

“Really. I caused chaos to win by not allowing all those people to be killed. Do you really think you are a force of law and order and not just a bigger terrorist?”

“You insult me, Holiday. We are not terrorists. We are far above that. We are the controllers forming a network of deep operatives from many nations. We are the permanent government most people never see. We are dealing with a larger world problem. The population grows, and technology advances at lightning pace. Add to it democracy that has simply gotten out of hand. There is only one solution for the world and for this nation, and that is an absolute police state. We will get it because people will simply give it to us. Fear of terrorism and death means they will hand over their freedom to us. They will have seen the truth; that security is better for them ... that rule by the unseen but powerful forces of the deeper state is the only direction humanity can take.”

“Yes, and when freedom is completely gone ... the supposed safety will never arrive. People will live under the lawlessness of hidden criminal actors. Without a democratic state to control them, they will begin to wage war against each other. The many factions of the mafia state will create hell on earth, and it won't be something new. It has happened before, Kufner, but people like you don't look at history all that much. Hell, I don't even have to stop you. If I die, so what? You and your crowd will fail and cause much bloodshed in the process. But sooner or later, it will be over for you.”

“You got this far with pure luck, Holiday. One day sooner, and I would have ended your game. As it is, it is just a delay. Look over there at that van parked where there used to be a gate. It is set up just for you. You see, it is loaded with weapons, and there are two dead bodies inside it. You are going to be the third body and found dead near that van. A new Joe Holiday profile will appear online. It will be done just after you die. This entire difficult affair, which began with small bombings downtown, came about because of a white supremacist named Joe Holiday. An idiot white supremacist because his gang blew up a derelict building they were using as a bomb factory. Then they got into a shoot-out, which left the last of them dead.”

Joe said nothing; he stared directly into Kufner's cold eyes and prepared to move in to attempt to disarm him. Kufner looked to be both smugly satisfied and out of words. He was raising the gun to shoot, and then he heard twigs snap, and it startled him. He shifted to the right because of the sound of someone approaching. Joe's vision remained blurry; he could see a man emerging from the haze. Since this person's arrival had startled Kufner, Joe knew it wasn't one of Kufner's spooks. Kufner was about to take a shot at this newcomer, and there wouldn't be another chance, so Joe rushed forward and checked Kufner aside the way a hockey player would do it.

Kufner got off a shot as Joe hit him, and the other man proved to be armed, ready, and a good shooter because he instantly returned fire – two shots. Both shots hit Kufner's torso, and Joe was lucky he wasn't hit because he stumbled on the lumpy ground and couldn't stop himself from tumbling down on Kufner. A grotesque gasp came from Kufner as they hit the ground.

After rolling left into some weeds, Joe scrambled up on hands and knees and found himself looking up at Sterling Brodie. There was a brief pause, and both men shifted their eyes to Kufner, where he lay on the ground. Kufner was on his side, looking away

from Joe. He had pulled himself into a fetal position, but that broke suddenly as his body went into spasms. Kufner released a cross between a sigh and a moan, shivered one last time, and fell still.

Brodie kept his weapon trained on Joe as he stepped closer. He wore a black knit cap and Khaki fatigues. He had a green canvas jacket over his vest. His gun was a compact Sig Sauer. He looked odd, being dressed for combat yet carrying a gun that could only do six close shots. But Joe didn't laugh, not yet, because Brodie was grinning and he was not lowering the gun.

Joe stood up but made no fast moves. "I'm waiting," he said.

"Waiting for what?"

"Whatever sorry excuse you probably have for being in on this and wanting me dead."

Brodie lowered the gun and kept grinning. "The wait is over. I'm not in on it. I found out Jason Kufner was dirty. A bar owner turned in some surveillance two hours ago that showed him planting a small explosive device downtown. I grabbed the camera surveillance from the Liberty Import Complex while investigating a missing guard. I figured it out Holiday, but a bit too late. You moved the bombs out here."

"So what are you going to do?"

"You have a van hidden over there. Get in it, drive away."

"You're going to let it go?"

"The terrorists here are dead. We know there are others elsewhere. My guess is you killed the ones here. Arresting you will just complicate things, even though you broke about a hundred laws. I can burn the camera surveillance from the Liberty Import Complex."

"You got one part wrong. The idiots mostly killed each other. But I can see that you don't particularly care how they died. You enjoyed killing Kufner. The big grin was hard to miss."

"I almost shot you with him when you got in the way. I would have felt bad about killing someone else, but not any of them. Especially not Kufner. Call it the grin of satisfaction, because he deserved to die."

"I don't exactly feel sorry for him either, but I see only you. Look at this fucking mess. How will you explain it? How will you clean it up?"

"Velisa Newport is on the way. Fuck, a whole intelligence team is on the way. I called her when I pulled in. I saw the explosion on the road. Told her about Kufner, that I was tracking him here."

"You mean the spooks are going to cover this up?"

"No choice. Newport and the others now know our intelligence agencies have been infiltrated by a rogue international organization. The public aspect of this will be buried. The protocol in such situations is to investigate clandestinely. I was supposed to wait and not come in until they arrive. You have about fifteen minutes before they get here. Just walk and don't worry about them. They have to make a deal with me, and I'll make

sure they don't come around and bother you. Call it a bounty payment, for somehow killing those assholes."

Joe was about to reply, but he waited. He took his eyes off Brodie and looked around at the smoking wasteland. There was only one sane decision, and that was to head for the exit door Brodie had opened. "Okay, I walk. Hell, this is a police matter, a federal matter. There's no place in it for an amateur like me."

Brodie nodded. "So you finally got the message." He put his gun in his holster, and he felt about as useless as a cop could feel as he watched Joe walk over the field to his van. He wondered about Holiday for some moments, then looked down at Kufner's corpse and started shaking his head with disgust.

---the end---