

“Exotic locations, intricate plot, well developed characters. More thrills than climbing the Matterhorn!”
D.L. Wilson, author of *Sirocco* & *Unholy Grail*

NO REMORSE

IAN WALKLEY

McCloud is a loose cannon...
...just what they need.

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1

Lee McCloud ached to kill the five men in the valley below. But he couldn't. Not yet. He ignored the sharp piece of rubble under his ribs and eased the sniper rifle into the familiar position, butt firmly against his shoulder, hand cupping the grip, finger resting on the trigger guard. Like spooning with a woman, Mac reflected, though he hadn't done that in a while.

He watched the Ford Explorer, with Bob at the wheel, racing towards the meeting point up through the barren hills surrounding the El Carrizo dam. He switched his view back to the five men standing around a van and a Land Cruiser. Checking the laser range finder, he adjusted the Hensoldt scope. Six hundred yards. As close as he and his men would dare go. They couldn't risk stirring the loose rubble to get closer. As it was, they'd only just made it into position before the Mexicans showed.

He wouldn't admit it in a psych evaluation, but he enjoyed the feeling of having an enemy in the crosshairs. For a few seconds he had God-like control. All he had to do was squeeze. But right now they needed confirmation that Sophia and Danni were in the van before he could give the order.

The exchange was taking place a few miles outside Tijuana. Desert country, scarred with boulders and littered with caves and patchy grass that reminded him of an area northeast of Kandahar, where four years ago his unit had freed a six-person UNAMA team held by Taliban insurgents. But not before they had raped the two women and castrated the team leader.

A gust of wind blew grit in his weathered face. Swallowing several times to suppress the urge to cough, Mac put a small pebble in his mouth, sucking on it to relieve the irritation. He could hear the click of the digital SLR behind him as Termite took photos of the kidnappers and their vehicles through the zoom lens, in case they needed evidence later.

He pressed his radio's talk button. "Sierra One, this is Sierra Six. Notify when you are in position. Over."

He shifted his aim to the skinny one with the bowlegs, who he assumed was the leader by the way he was ordering the others about. All of them wore gray uniforms with Atlantic blue caps and a Mexican flag patch on their left shoulder. The uniform of the *Federales*, the Mexican National Police. From the nonchalant way they were standing around, he decided they probably

were real cops. If anything, this made him angrier. They were kidnapers. Taking advantage of their position to earn a corrupt living. Way he figured it, killing these creeps would do both countries a favor.

All the same, if they had to let the bastards go or forfeit the ransom money, he wouldn't care, so long as they got Sophia and Danni back safely. The three volunteers he'd recruited from his Delta unit knew that freeing the girls was their one and only priority.

"We're good to go, Sierra Six. Over." Scotty's voice was as mellow as a tenor's. After six months away from combat operations, Scotty was hungry for action and had been the first to volunteer for the unauthorized mission.

Mac shifted the crosshairs of his scope to the thickset *Federale* with the pockmarked face and dull eyes. This guy reeked of thug—he was spinning a long-bladed knife as though it was a juggler's club, had a tattoo of a skull on his neck, and when he laughed his lips pulled to one side in a sneer, as though he'd been cut and sewn back together by a surgeon with Parkinson's disease. All of these guys would kill without hesitation, Mac was sure of it.

Scotty and Freckle were tucked away somewhere in shadows on the next hill. Two firing positions gave them better observation capability and a broader perimeter of fire.

After the call from Bob telling him the sixteen-year-old best friends, Sophia and Danni, had been snatched off the street in Tijuana, he'd had just enough time to grab three volunteers, hunt down some kit from the Delta store, and hitch four seats on the shuttle from Fort Bragg to San Diego. With luck, they'd be back on base before anybody noticed. But if the shit hit the fan, they were on their own.

"Sierra One, I'll take the guy with the knife and the leader with the pistol. Scotty, you take the two with the AK-47s. Freckle, you stop the van going anywhere."

"Affirmative," Scotty said.

Bob's dusky silver Explorer bounced along the rutted gravel track past the ruins of an adobe hut and pulled up near the kidnapers' Land Cruiser. It was close enough now that he could hear the two fathers in the Explorer talking through the transmitter disguised in Bob's belt.

The kidnapers' leader flicked his cigarette onto the barren ground and hacked up a gob of spit as the two men got out of the Explorer. None of the kidnapers made any attempt to adopt a defensive position.

That was when Mac realized something wasn't right.

2

The girls' fathers, Bob and Marvin, each carried a briefcase full of cash with a tiny GPS tracker hidden in a false bottom. They were both taller than the kidnapers, and through the scope Mac could read the pain on Bob's face. The behavior of the kidnapers was still bothering him, but there was nothing he could do except watch. The leader held out his palm and waved his pistol like it was a flag. He addressed the fathers in accented English.

"You're late. We think perhaps you do not want your daughters back, eh?"

"Sorry," Bob said, his breathing short and sharp. "We took a wrong turn coming into the dam. The signs were confusing."

The man grunted and glanced at the one with the knife. "Check them."

Knife Man patted them down, searched their pockets, nodded the all clear.

"You have our money?"

"Of course." Bob's voice came through deep and confident in his earpiece, although the armpits of his shirt betrayed his anxiety. Be courteous but strong, Mac had advised him, otherwise they won't respect you. Being a basketball coach undoubtedly helped. "And you have our daughters," Bob said. A statement, not a question. He held out the briefcase. "Here's the money. We didn't contact the police."

Several kidnapers gave a hearty laugh.

The leader smirked. "We wouldn't be here if you had, gringo. But your daughters would be. With bullets in their heads." He gestured to a kidnapper wearing a red bandana around his neck. "*Abrirlos*," he ordered, and the man took both briefcases and unclipped the locks.

"It's all there. Two hundred thousand dollars." With his palms open and his bulky gut, Marvin looked like a preacher calling for the collection plate.

"Ah, my friend Benjamin Franklin." The gaunt-faced leader grinned at the piles of hundreds. He turned to the man with the bandana. "Count it. Transfer it to our bag."

Mac's earpiece crackled and Freckle's voice said, "Sierra Six, we'll lose the trackers if they transfer the cash."

"Roger that. So long as we get the girls out safe," Mac replied.

Down at the rendezvous, Marvin turned toward the van. "Now, will you please give us

our daughters.” He phrased it as a statement, an expectation.

After an arrogant pause, the leader gestured at Knife Man, who opened the rear door and pulled two girls out, their mouths taped and hands bound in front.

Mac froze. The breath choked in his throat. He closed his eyes for just a moment to suppress the memories, bitter and hard, and took deep breaths to clear the stabbing pain in his heart. He forced the memories back to the dark place he kept them hidden, even from himself.

When he opened his eyes he could see it wasn't Sophia and Danni they had dumped on the ground. These girls were Latinas, probably no more than twelve or thirteen. *That's why the bastards were so confident.* They'd kept Sophia and Danni, and now they could take the cash without being tracked. And they would demand more, he was certain. But why bring these other girls along? What was the point?

He twisted his head slightly and said to Termite, “Get photos of the girls. It might be important. This could all be some kind of weird performance.”

Marvin turned to face the leader. “There's some mistake. What do you—?”

Knife Man stepped forward and punched him square in the face, knocking him to the ground. Then he grabbed the shorter of the girls and pressed the knife at her throat. Through the scope, Mac could see the terror on her tiny face, eyes widening in fear, tears streaming down her cheeks. Knife Man's yellow teeth formed a warped grin.

The van door was open, but from this angle Mac couldn't see inside. “Freckle, Scotty, you guys spot Sophia or Danni?”

“Negative, Mac. There are no other girls in the van.”

Fuck.

Marvin struggled to his feet, tentatively touching his nose. Blood streamed down his face onto the sand.

The leader gestured with the pistol again. “A mistake? *Huevos.*” He turned to his men and waved his arms.

“*Pendejo!* Perhaps the gringos, they don't like spic chicks, eh?” said Knife Man, waving his blade. It flashed in the sun.

Bob took a step forward, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Come on. We've paid you the two hundred thousand you asked for. Surely you can understand we'd like our own daughters back?”

A licorice scent flared in Mac's nostrils, a sign of his inner fear that he'd learned to read over the years. A sudden chill flowed through his veins as the blood pumped through him. His inner rage and fear were warning him that he needed to do something, and fast. "I have a bad feeling about this," he said on the radio. "When I give the word, take them down." He kept his voice steady, gritting his teeth to try and shove the brewing storm back where it belonged.

"You think your daughters are worth only two hundred thousand? These *putas* are what you get for that."

"*Si*. Others pay much more," Knife Man said, twisting the hair of the girl he was holding. She cried out and stopped moving.

The leader rounded on him, pointing his pistol. "Shut up, *vato loco!*"

Bob held out an arm, pleading with the leader. "Please. Tell him not to hurt the girl."

The leader muttered something unintelligible in Spanish and Knife Man laughed.

"Please understand," said Bob. "We're not wealthy men. But we love our daughters. Please—"

"It's *you* who choose not to understand, *yanqui*. We too have to feed our families. It costs much to keep your girls safe. You are certain you no want these girls? They do anything you want..."

"No, goddamn it!" yelled Marvin, flinging his arms around. "We want *our* daughters, okay? Not them. We had a deal."

"Okay." The leader shrugged and glanced sideways.

Knife Man grinned and sliced his blade across the girl's throat. Bright syrupy blood spurted across the sand, spraying Bob and Marvin. The kidnappers laughed as Knife Man released the girl's hair and she collapsed to the ground, her head almost severed from her tiny neck.

At the same time, the leader fired at the other girl, who fell to the ground, where he shot her again.

3

“Holy fucking Christ!” Termite exploded, his voice still a whisper.

Mac felt like a great claw was ripping apart his stomach. He’d waited too long to give the order. But there’d been nothing to suggest they would harm the girls. Regardless, he now realized he’d fucked up. Even so, killing the kidnapers now wouldn’t get Sophia and Danni back, and that was the objective. He spat out the pebble and said, “Hold your fire.”

“They’ll kill the fathers, Mac,” Scotty said over the radio.

“Hold. We have to give them one more chance to find out where the girls are.”

“No! God Almighty!” Marvin was screaming over and over. “Oh my God!”

Bob stood paralyzed for a moment, as though unable to comprehend what he’d just witnessed, then sank to his knees and covered his face with his hands.

The kidnapper with the bandana was doubled over, laughing at the fathers’ reaction. Knife Man just stood there, watching them.

“And now, *yanquis*, you get to dig their graves,” the leader said. “And while you are doing this, you will think about what will happen to your pretties if you don’t bring us another two hundred thousand in seven days. We call the Stewmaker.”

“No! We’ll get more money. Just show us that our daughters are all right,” Bob said. “We just need to know they’re okay. Let us speak to them on the phone.”

The man with the bandana was running from the car yelling, holding up a small device.

“Found one of the trackers,” Termite said.

Fuck. “Stand by to fire,” Mac said on the radio, his voice calm and detached. He switched aim, placing the leader’s head in the crosshairs. “We need one of them alive. The least threat is the guy in the van.”

“Affirmative.” This from Scotty.

The leader ran to the van and grabbed binoculars. Scanned the surrounding hills. Then turned to Marvin and held up the GPS, his face contorted with rage. “What is this? You take us for fools? You think you can play this game?”

“No! Of course not. We just—” Marvin spluttered.

“You tried to deceive us. Now you lose.” He started to raise his pistol.

“Execute.” Mac spoke the word calmly, then squeezed the trigger. Felt a satisfying buck in his shoulder. The leader’s head exploded. His body was still dropping to the ground as Mac put two rounds in Knife Man, who crumpled like a blown out bag.

Running towards the meeting point, Mac could see that Scotty had shot the man leaning against the Land Cruiser and wounded the one with the bandana, who was writhing on the ground, screaming from a bullet in his gut. Freckle had blown out the front and back tires of one side of the van. The terrified driver had bolted, with Bob running after him firing the leader’s pistol in the air. The man stopped and raised his arms. Bob marched him back and handed him over to Termite.

“Nothing to indicate where they’ve taken the others,” Scotty said. “Sick fucking bastards. My daughter’s not much younger than those little girls.”

Mac took off his sunglasses and held Bob’s arms, fixing him with a resolute gaze. “We’ll get them back. I swear to God, Bob, we will find them. The two kidnappers still alive will know something.” As he said this, he realized he owed Bob that much at least, for saving him from the slippery slope he had been on after his father died. His own peace of mind would depend on finding Sophia.

Bob nodded, then bent over to vomit. Over by the van, Marvin was sitting down on a rock, face in his hands.

Striding over to the wounded kidnapper writhing on the ground, Mac grabbed his hair and leaned close. “Where are the other girls?”

The dying man opened his eyes and spat blood in Mac's face. Closed his eyes and groaned. No joy there.

Glancing over to where Termite had cuffed the young driver and sat him on the ground, he could see the kid was terrified. Would he have balls and clam up too? Mac pulled out his pistol and spoke at the wounded man, loud enough so the kid would overhear. “You’ve got five seconds to tell me where you’re keeping them. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.” He fired two rounds into the man’s head and then turned to the kid and snarled. “You’re next, kid.”

“I do nothing! I only drive the van that my uncle asks! Now you kill him!”

“Yeah, I did. What’s your name, kid?”

“Mamexi.”

“Mamexi, you have five seconds. Where are the girls being held?”

Mamexi looked over at the dead man and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

He held the pistol against the youth’s left ear. “One, two...” For a moment, he thought the kid was going to stay clammed up. It was one thing shooting a dying man, another killing an unarmed teenager, even in these circumstances. There were other options he could try first...

“Okay! They sold them.”

“Where are they?”

“They kill me if I say. They have important connections.”

Freckle scratched his rather large ear. “Christ! The Cartels. Let’s just fucking shoot the bastard.” He took out his pistol, playing along.

Mac glared at the kid. “We don’t give a fuck about anyone’s connections.”

Mamexi said nothing, but shook his head.

Mac detected a hint of a smile. That needed to be dealt with quickly and firmly. “You think I’m bluffing?”

The smile turned to a smirk. “You American. Not allowed shoot unarmed kids.”

This was a situation they had encountered in the ‘Stan and Iraq, and they had developed numerous creative ways to counter such an attitude. Giving Mamexi a severe stare, Mac went over to a pile of boulders and dislodged a rock about the size of a human head. A black scorpion underneath scuttled away to find another place to hide. He lugged the rock back. “Hold him,” he said.

Scotty grabbed the kid’s feet and Termite held his arms so he was stretched out on his back.

“Mamexi, this rock weighs about fifty pounds. When I smash it onto your kneecap, it’ll cause at least as much damage as a bullet fired from my pistol.”

The kid’s eyes bulged. “You wouldn’t—”

He slammed the rock down, crushing the kneecap into a mash of ligament and tendon. Mamexi blacked out. His knee swelled to four times its normal size. Bob turned away, a strangled sound coming from his throat. When the kid came around, he screamed so loudly they had to move away until he’d recovered a semblance of normality.

Mac spoke in a calm voice. “Now, Mamexi, if you’re smart you’ll believe me when I say I will do the same to your other knee.” He stooped to pick up the rock. “Maybe the Cartel will find you. Then again, the wild dogs and Gila monsters might finish you first.”

Mamexi leaned over and retched up a foul-smelling muck, groaning.

Mac raised the rock above his other knee.

“No! Please! In God’s name! I tell you, *señor!* All what I know...” He took a short breath, groaning from the pain. “They take them in a truck to Juarez. They fly them out. I not know where. Please... That is all I know.”

“Who did they sell them to? Who?” He wiggled the rock, about to drop it.

“Wait!” Mamexi screamed. “I...I hear them talk about a gringo. ‘The Frenchman’, they call him. No name. Just ‘The Frenchman’.”

4

“Please... no,” Sophia sobbed, all of her energy drained.

The man ignored her.

She felt like she was going to be sick again, but there was nothing left to retch up. She tried to pray, tried to take her mind away from the restraints binding her arms and legs, from the fact that she was naked and vulnerable to the man who was now inserting a cold metal instrument inside her.

“Please, God...” Sophia had tried to convince him she was a virgin, but he had insisted on violating her to check for himself. He’d undertaken more intrusive tests, too, including drawing blood. He was old, with gray hair, and he’d told her in English that his name was Dr. Gammal.

She glanced at the olive-skinned man in white shorts and a golf shirt who stood by the door staring, occasionally growling words she couldn’t understand. Another shiver rocked her body as the instrument was withdrawn. The dark, beady eyes and cold smile reminded her of a shark. So devoid of humanity, so cruel, looking at her like she was an animal, or worse.

The long journey had been a nightmare, bouncing along in trucks and noisy cargo planes. First, they had thrown Sophia and Danni into the back of a truck filled with crates of vegetables, barely enough room to move, struggling to breathe in air that reeked like steamed cabbage. Crammed in with them were two others, Jeanette from Toronto, and Erika, from Sweden, who explained in stilted English that she was an exchange student, taken in Mexico City. Jeanette cried as she told them three men grabbed her as she was walking through the grounds of her hotel to the pool. The two bottles of water they’d been given were soon empty, and they sucked water from the lettuce leaves in one of the crates. Sophia tried to reassure the others, to talk her own confidence up. Air trickling in through a small ventilation grill couldn’t disperse the heat and fumes, and after a while Jeanette began to retch. The stench was revolting, and soon all four of them had emptied their stomachs into a plastic bucket they found in the corner.

"I'm so sorry, Sophe." Danni said, as the truck lumbered along. "I wish I'd never suggested we go shopping by ourselves."

Sophia shook her head and held Danni close and said words she was not so sure of herself. "They'll get us back, I'm sure of it." Still, she cursed herself for nagging their parents to

let her and Danni go shopping. It should have been safe, only ten minutes from their hotel. But it wasn't. She'd read enough to know about pedophile networks and sex slavery, and the haunted faces of the other girls, visible in the rays of light coming through the ventilation grill, filled Sophia with dread.

Jeanette stopped crying, and her voice took on a resigned, stoic tone: "We're all girls... Even if they intend to ransom us, they'll probably rape us. Lock us up somewhere, maybe torture us... They might never let us go."

"Please," Sophia said. "Let's try to stay positive. We have to survive this journey. Help each other."

"Who are these people? How can they treat us like this, worse than animals?" Danni said.

"I think maybe it is the drug gangs," Erika said.

"How were you taken?" Jeanette asked Sophia.

"Just walking along the street back from the Plaza Mall in Tijuana. Two cops in a car stopped us. Made out we had drugs in our bags, and arrested us. They drove us out of town and dumped us in this truck."

Jeanette shook her head. "Oh my God. Cops? Even the freaking cops can't be trusted here? What hope have we got, then?"

After what seemed like a lifetime, the truck stopped to refuel. They cried out for help, for water. The rear door opened. Two men stood there, holding guns.

Sophia pulled Danni close, determined not to be separated from her. "Try to stay together, okay? No matter what happens," she whispered.

Jeanette yelled: "Hey! I'm a diabetic! I need insulin!"

Sophia added, "She needs medicine. Please..." She tried to speak calmly. "You understand?"

The two men spoke briefly in Spanish. The one with a moustache said: "I understand." He threw four bottles of water at them, then slammed and locked the door. The truck took off again. Gradually, the sulphury smell of diesel filled the compartment. Despite their attempts to keep her awake, Jeanette lapsed into unconsciousness, heaving labored breaths. The droning of the engine and the fumes made Sophia drowsy, and at some point she passed out. She awoke to Danni shaking her, whispering her name. The truck had stopped. She could hardly turn her head because of the thumping, shooting pain inside her skull.

After a few minutes the truck's rear door was opened. Warm, fresh air flooded in. Sophia breathed deeply and squinted at the daylight outside. It looked like they were inside an old aircraft hangar. The distant roar of an aircraft taking off echoed off the walls and seemed to reverberate inside her head. The hangar door was closed, and two armed men stood guard.

Four smelly, unshaved men jumped up into the truck and roughly pulled the girls out. The hangar had several holes in its roof so she could see the blue sky, and even the brief glimpse of freedom was enough to give her a little heart. The men here were not dressed as police, like those who had kidnapped them, but they spoke Spanish. They must still be in Mexico.

They watched as Jeanette's limp form was laid on the floor of the hangar. Sophia went to go to help her but was pushed back by a short man with fat hands. Danni and Erika were sobbing inconsolably. Two of the men shouted and waved their arms, apparently in an argument about what had happened. As the girls stared in horror, the two men carried Jeanette's body to the back of the hangar and threw her into a dumpster.

The short man ordered them to strip, in plain sight of the leering men, then turned a fire hose on them as the men laughed at the spectacle. They whimpered as the hard, cold water pummeled them. Sophia closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself back home, safe in her room, but the force of the water knocked her off her feet and sent her reeling on the concrete.

When the dousing was finished, another older, balding man tossed them some grubby towels and cotton robes, and once they had dressed, he handcuffed them to a chain. They sat on the floor and waited, wondering what would happen next. After a while, the balding man brought some tortillas and water. Exhausted, the three girls finally fell asleep, huddled together on the concrete floor. During the night, two more trucks arrived, each carrying kids, one who looked only about seven or eight. In all, ten girls and three boys were loaded onto a cargo plane that took off, heading east. On board, the terrified captives spoke in whispers, speculating about their destination and their fate.

"Do you think our parents have been contacted by the kidnappers? Danni asked.

Sophia shrugged. "I just hope they don't end up dealing with the cops who snatched us."

"Do you think they'd have taken us if our brothers had been with us?"

"Probably. They were cops. And Wade and Franklin are only fourteen, like that boy over there. They'd have probably taken them, too. Thank God Maddie decided to stay at college for Spring Break."

After a long flight, the aircraft landed in the dark, on a brightly lit runway, and armed men hustled them onto another plane, this time a smaller, fat-bodied one with propellers. The noise was deafening, and nobody spoke for the three hours or so it took to reach the next stop. Here, they were pushed into a truck and driven through a dirty, half-destroyed city that looked like it had been through a war. Sophia thought she could hear distant gunshots as they drove. Danni agreed that they must be somewhere in Africa. The air was steamy and clouds of mosquitoes inside the truck feasted on the captives in the dawn humidity. Finally, they arrived at a port, where they were joined by another group of thirteen captive teenagers from European countries. Armed soldiers supervised their transfer to a motorboat that took them out on a slow rolling ocean and tied up alongside an enormous vessel that looked like a cruise ship. A gold plate halfway up the side displayed the name PRINCESS ALIYA. Way above them, Sophia could see several men with skin the color of burnt caramel, dressed in flowing white robes. The knot in her stomach tightened. Maybe they had been sold to an Arab sheik's harem?

Crewmen from the vessel herded the captives below decks and into cells that held four people on bunk beds, with a shared toilet and washbasin. Sophia and Danni were put in a cell with Erika and a tiny eight-year-old named Carmel, who'd been separated from her brother Gregory and sobbed quietly in Sophia's arms. Soon after the ship got underway, crewmen brought them food and drinks, and watched while they ate.

"Where are they taking us now, I wonder?" Danni said.

Sophia tried to get Carmel to eat. "Come on, you have to eat, baby, so your mom and dad will see how strong you've become."

"Some men shot my mommy and daddy," Carmel replied, shaking her head. "Now they've taken Greg away, too."

A short time after she had finished eating, Sophia had drifted off. She had slept soundly until she had found herself on the examination table, with Dr. Gammal bending over her.

Now, as Sophia lay on the examining table trying to block the horrible scenarios swirling through her mind, she heard the doctor mention her name several times as he completed his report to the shark-eyed man. He grinned and left, apparently satisfied, although Sophia couldn't understand what they had been discussing.

After the man had left, she breathed a little easier. Dr. Gammal seemed excited as he told

her they would soon be arriving at a beautiful island. He studied her for a few moments and smiled, as if to reassure her that everything would be all right. Then he said, as he fiddled with his clothing, “Now, my girl, you will open your pretty mouth.”

5

After stubbing out his cigarette on the solid gold ashtray, Ziad took off his shoes and entered the expansive suite on the upper deck of the Princess Aliya, continuing through to the covered deck outside where Sheik Khalid Yubani lay prone on a massage table. He looked fit and muscled, having lost a good twenty pounds since the Egyptian girl, Sheriti, had started as his personal trainer. Khalid's sister, Rubi, sat beside the massage table, wet hair wrapped in a towel, jotting notes as he dictated instructions.

Sheriti, wearing a lycra micro bikini that revealed tan lines across her buttocks and around her breasts, knelt astride Khalid's back and dug her thumbs into the muscles on either side of his spine. Her skin glistened and, as Ziad watched, a bead of sweat drizzled off her collarbone onto the swell of a breast. Holding his cell phone unobtrusively against his chest, he pressed the video button. He would enjoy watching her again later, back in his cabin. He adjusted his crotch to hide the discomfort and waited until Khalid had finished his instructions to Rubi.

"Good morning, Highness," he said eventually, "I have a few matters to report."

Khalid grunted.

Ziad switched from Arabic to French. Sheriti didn't speak French. "We've completed unloading the weapons for Al Shabaab and we've taken on board the orphans. We'll be leaving Mogadishu within the hour. Rubi, could you please generate an invoice for Sheik Taldari, for the Al Shabaab consignment? One point two million euros. We also need to invoice Al Qaeda for the explosives we unloaded off Yemen yesterday. Two million US dollars."

"Make it four million," Khalid said. "Sheik Abidi is paying on behalf of Al Qaeda, through the Hunnafite Orphan Foundation." He chuckled.

"Yes, brother." Rubi jotted down the details.

"On second thoughts, make it six."

"Abidi would not accept six," Rubi said. "He may accept five."

"Ah! It is like a mosquito bite to him."

"You know he doesn't like to be overcharged, brother."

Khalid grunted as Sheriti dug her elbow into his back. "Five it shall be, then."

Ziad moved closer to take in Sheriti's scent—a heady fragrance of floral and sweet citrus, with a hint of musk. He licked his lips, his eyes addicted to the hypnotic movement of her slim, toned body. As if to further provoke him, she glanced back and smiled, her full, dark lips revealing a mouth of perfect, white teeth.

She had joined them eight months earlier after Khalid had met her working at the Grand Hyatt in Cairo. Ziad's contacts in Egyptian Security reported her clean: she was an only child, her parents had been killed by Israeli bombs in Beirut, and her only close relative was an old aunt in Cairo.

Enjoy it while it lasts, pretty Sheriti. Ziad knew Khalid would eventually tire of her, as he had with his last two personal trainers, and when he did, Sheriti would be his... until he too grew bored with her. When eventually they dumped her overboard, she wouldn't be missed.

"I have good news, Highness," he said excitedly. "We may have located a suitable donor for your father. She has the same rare blood type, AB negative. We have a few more tests to undertake, but Dr. Gammal is hopeful she will be a serotype suitable for your father. She could be the one in a million. An American girl, from the shipment supplied by the Frenchman. We have her aboard now."

Khalid raised his head for a moment. "Wonderful news. It is Allah's will. We must take good care of her, Ziad."

"Yes, Highness. Do you wish to see her?"

"Why would I? She is a pair of lungs. I will see them when they are harvested and put into my father's chest."

"She is very pretty, Highness. I thought you might—"

"Then you will be responsible for ensuring that she doesn't come to any harm from the crew. Is the construction on Andaran ready for handover?"

"The resort and the fortress will be ready for your final inspection after the banquet. Although we may have one remaining problem. Bill Fanning." Ziad moved slightly further behind Sheriti, who had raised her buttocks provocatively as she rubbed Khalid's back with her forearms. Ziad wanted to ensure he captured everything on his phone videocam. "Sergei has been monitoring Fanning's emails. He has sent copies of the plans to his office in Dubai, in defiance of the secrecy requirements."

Khalid made a clicking sound with his tongue. "*We must* have the ability to maintain the

facilities without him. We have discussed what must be done.”

“But Highness, we cannot dispose of him yet. Not until—”

“Do I have to spell it out? Find the wife! Once we have her, we will get everything he stole and be able to rid ourselves of all the loose ends. Now, you may both leave us.”

Ziad followed Rubi out and closed the glass sliding door. They both turned and watched as Sheriti slipped off her bikini and lay on Khalid’s back, sliding against him in a slow, circular motion. Ziad felt his arousal intensify. He could sense the lightheadedness that told him he would need release soon.

Rubi had a superior smirk as she put her face close to his. “You think Sheriti will be yours, Ziad, like the last two? I think perhaps this time it will not happen. I believe that my brother is intending to marry Sheriti.”

He stepped back and frowned. “Surely this can’t be true. She’s not of his clan.”

“No, she’s not.” Rubi nodded at his cell phone. “And make me a copy of the video.”

6

The Suburban had been following Mac for two blocks now. As he continued through the pain of his first morning run after almost two weeks of confinement at the prison at Fort Bragg, he was more curious than afraid. Who were these guys? And why were they following him?

Two weeks ago, shortly after returning to Fort Bragg, he and his team had been arrested and placed on suspension pending formal charges. Scotty had been packed off back to Hereford in the United Kingdom to face a disciplinary hearing in front of his SAS Commanding Officer. Termite and Freckle were still waiting on charges to be laid.

Mac had had the book thrown at him. Rumor had it his case had become embroiled in some sort of power play between two Generals at the Pentagon, one of whom was trying to curb the influence and budget allocation of the Special Operations Command. Mac had been charged with two counts of negligent homicide relating to the deaths of the two girls killed by the kidnapers, and one count of aggravated assault on the youth Mamexi, who apparently had lost a leg. Mac's attorney had advised him that it was certain he would face a full court-martial, which would mean another year or more on suspension from Delta, then a trial. He was prepared to accept that he had fucked up, allowing the two young Mexican girls to be killed. It would stay on his conscience for the rest of his life. But negligent homicide? That was crazy.

His biggest fear was that they would lose the trail, that Sophia and Danni would vanish forever, denied justice. If that happened, it wouldn't matter what the court-martial found. During Mac's confinement he had kept in touch with Bob, who'd continued to follow up leads with limited assistance from the FBI, which apologized that it was fully occupied stopping terrorists and curbing the Mexican drug cartels. He was only sorry he couldn't help Bob more actively. Last he'd heard, Bob was following up leads from a list of flights out of Ciudad Juarez, which Marvin had somehow obtained from an FBI source, an investor in one of Marvin's condos in southern Baja.

Mac jogged across the road to the old Confederate cemetery where he stopped to recover, his face flushed with thumping blood. The freshly mown grass had a minty scent and the early morning dew caused clippings to cling to his sneakers. He found a dry area and started doing sit-ups. The Suburban pulled over and the two men inside sat watching. Maybe they were just there

to make sure he didn't skip town before tomorrow's Article Thirty-Two hearing.

In darker moments of his confinement over the past two weeks, Mac had reflected on how some guys in a similar situation might eat the barrel of a pistol. But taking the easy way out wasn't him. In the bathroom mirror one morning, he'd been jolted by the dark circles under his bloodshot eyes and the furry tongue. He was determined to expunge the crap that had been filling his mind and his time in custody. He'd had it with accepting what the politicians at the Pentagon were dishing out. Time to fight. He would tough it out. Whatever he had to do, he was prepared. Any deal, so long as it enabled him to continue the search for Sophia and Danni.

He had made the call to his Commanding Officer, Colonel Matheson.

Back on his feet, he jogged off along the track into a thicket of trees. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the men step out of the vehicle and begin to walk quickly after him. An average-height moon face in uniform, early thirties, and a tall suit, late forties, shiny scalp, John Lennon glasses, trimmed graying goatee. He doubted they were here to kill him. A minute later, after they hurried past where he was hiding, he stepped out onto the track.

"Looking for me?" he said, jogging on the spot.

The two men swung around. The tall one with glasses moved his hand towards his waist, then relaxed. He was carrying. But if someone wanted to eliminate the problem called Lee McCloud, there were plenty of better ways to do it. He sized them up. They both had the physiques of office workers. No contest.

"Sergeant Lee McCloud? I'm Captain Bryce Taylor from JAG. This is Derek Wisebaum."

"A Confederate cemetery's a hell of a place to offer a plea bargain."

Taylor brushed aside a low hanging limb. "As you're aware, Sergeant, your case has created some difficulties in Washington..."

Mac held up his hand. "Guys, I don't want to hear this bullshit, all right? My lawyer told me someone wanted my scalp for a career hump. Whatever, I don't care."

"You'll want to listen to our offer," Wisebaum said coolly, "if you care at all about your buddies."

"Excuse me?" Mac's muscles tensed at the implied threat. Wisebaum was a player—it was obvious from his eyes. That ruthless glint. Probably a spook, he decided, or some General's shit cleaner. Mac made it plain by the set of his jaw, the narrowing of his eyes and the hands on

his hips that he did not take kindly to threats.

Taylor spread his palms in a peace gesture and shot a disapproving look at Wisebaum. “Perhaps you’d be so good as to give us five minutes to explain, so we can all stop the posturing.”

“You have two,” he said. He took a swig from his water bottle. “And do us all a favor. Tell it like it is.”

Taylor swatted at one of the plentiful early morning mosquitoes. “All right. If tomorrow’s hearing goes as expected, you’ll face a general court-martial in a year’s time, at which you’ll be found guilty of the two charges of negligent homicide relating to the girls. You’ll be sentenced to two to five years’ incarceration, loss of rank and dishonorable discharge.”

“You can’t possibly know that. You’d have to own the jury *and* the judge.”

Wisebaum took off his glasses and shook his head.

“It’s politics, Sergeant.” Taylor continued: “Let’s say I’m wrong and you’re found not guilty. The powers in Washington will bring a murder charge for the four Mexican national police you killed or ordered to be killed.”

“You can’t do that. This isn’t fucking Mexico.”

Wisebaum rolled his eyes. “They can. And they will. Certain people want to make your case last.”

“And certain other people need the case to go away.” Despite the isolation of their surroundings, Taylor had lowered his voice. He smacked another mosquito. “We believe we have a solution. We can abort the court-martial today. You walk, with an unblemished record. And Sergeant Tucker and Sergeant Franks—Termite and Freckle—will also be off the hook.”

Mac laughed. These two expected him to trust their word? “But...?”

Taylor seemed to sense his skepticism. “*But*, you would have to plead guilty to the charges of AWOL and unauthorized use of weapons. You’d receive an Article Fifteen slap on the wrist and a standard discharge from the Army. No black marks. Full pension rights.”

“Leave the Army? What do I get out of that? I’ve got nothing to fall back on. No house. Not much saved. A soldier’s skillset...”

“You’d do some work for Mr. Wisebaum as part of the deal. A well-paid contract, as I understand it, doing the sort of work you’re good at.”

Mac studied Wisebaum’s eyes. “You with Blackwater XE? DynCorp? CIA?”

“All in good time,” Wisebaum said, putting on his glasses.

“I’m not leaving the Army—”

“The choices, McCloud,” Wisebaum interrupted, “are jail time with a dishonorable discharge, or the plea bargain and work with my agency. Your poison, bud.”

“Fuck, I don’t even know you guys!”

Wisebaum shrugged and gestured at Taylor. “Call him, Bryce.”

Taylor dialed a number and passed Mac the cell phone. It rang for a moment.

“Matheson.”

“Colonel? It’s Sergeant Lee McCloud. Sorry to—”

“Quite all right, Sergeant. You with Captain Taylor and Mr. Wisebaum?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for—”

“I know you’re a team player, Mac. It’s unfortunate you’ve ended up in the middle of this. Your own fault, of course. But we obviously need this disposed of quickly, and quietly, just as you want your freedom. I understand Mr. Wisebaum has an important mission for you that I understand will give you the scope you need in that regard.”

“Yes, sir. But—”

“Your record will be unblemished. Mac, I want to extend my gratitude for your outstanding service with SFOD-Delta. Your actions during your time with us saved many lives. I know that’s not enough, but you guys are used to that. There it is. Whatever you decide, good luck, soldier.”

“Thank you, sir. I—”

Matheson had hung up.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me you’d been speaking with Matheson?” Mac held out his hand. “Give me the document.”

He quickly read the plea bargain agreement and signed the three copies with the pen Taylor offered.

“I’ll be in touch,” Wisebaum said, and he and Taylor turned and strode away towards their car.

Mac stared at his copy and his vision blurred. He felt numb. He knew he should be pleased the matter had been settled. But he hadn’t expected the outcome to require him to leave the Army. The Army was his life. His family. His friends. His profession for the last sixteen

years. Whatever Wisebaum had in mind for him, it could never replace the times he'd spent with his Delta buddies.

He jogged back to the house and called Freckle and Termite to tell them the news. Eventually, he noticed the messages on the screen and checked them. There was a voice mail from Jogesh Khoury, his contact in Paris, telling him there was no news yet on The Frenchman, but that he would keep digging. There were also four missed calls from Bob's cell phone, but no messages. He returned Bob's call. At least he'd have a few days to help with the search before he'd be Wisebaum's boy.

Bob's wife, Elena answered. "Mac! Thank God you've called. We're in Martinique following a lead. Bob's been shot."

7

“Just take it easy, Austin. You don't understand.” Tally Francis said as she stood with her weight on her toes in the hallway of her house, ready to react if he attacked.

Austin Shephard was unshaved and reeked of beer and sweat. His shirt was wrinkled and buttoned wrong. He wasn't a big guy, but he was ex-Army who'd done it tough in Afghanistan, and being from Nebraska he'd been raised on beef seven days a week. Quick on his feet too—at least when he was sober. Tally was expecting the confrontation to end in violence like the last time, two weeks ago. She was still bruised and sore from then.

But this time she was better prepared.

She cursed herself for not bothering to check the security viewer before opening the door. But it had been natural for her to assume the buzzer was Rosco forgetting something; after all he'd only left a couple minutes earlier. Austin must have been watching, waiting for him to leave.

Austin's nostrils flared. He started jabbing his finger like he was stabbing a knife. “No, *you're* the one who doesn't understand. I come here to apologize and you shove it right in my face. *That's* what's not right. What is it now, two weeks? And already you're fucking other guys! You think I don't know? Jesus, I've seen the look on your face after a good fuck. The cheeks, the eyes. Look at yourself! You know what you are? You're a disgrace, you know that? A fucking, whoring disgrace!”

She crossed her arms defiantly, refusing to be drawn into an argument, but remaining alert in case she had to move fast. This time she wasn't going to let him get the jump on her. It was difficult to maintain a calm voice, and inside she felt like churning concrete. She had to get him out the door before he lost it. Her two-story house backed onto bush in the Montreal suburb of Laval, and neighbors would not be rushing to her aid any time soon.

“It was only Rosco from work,” she said. “I'd hardly be rushing into another relationship after us. Not that it's any of your business.”

“How convenient.” Austin said, as his demeanor continued to darken. “Clearly, I was standing in the way.”

“Rosco's gay, for God's sake! Surely you knew that. He makes no—”

“Oh, sure! He comes around for an intimate little meal and doesn’t leave till two a.m. You used to kick me out before that, and that was *after* we’d had sex!”

“*Rosco* cooked. And he likes to talk. And you kicked me once too often.”

“One time. I kicked you one time...”

“As I said. Once too often. And now I think you should leave.”

“Look, I said I was sorry. How many times do I have to fucking apologize?”

“Do you want me to call your mother? You obviously can’t drive.”

An aggressive laugh. Austin glared at her. He looked like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

“You fucking deserved it. You think you’re so smart, don’t you, in your nice, cushy office overlooking the lake. Looking down on people like me who have to do the dirty work in the field.”

“Just go, Austin. You need help. The Army will—”

“Don’t make this about the Army!” he yelled, jabbing the finger again. “I know what you think of the Army. This is about you, you skanky bitch. You and your whoring.” Suddenly his expression turned morose. “How can you treat me like this? After what I’ve been through...”

He began to cry.

Tally lowered her voice. “I think you should leave.”

He whimpered as the tears ran down his cheeks. Tally didn’t move any closer. She knew better. That was how he’d surprised her last time. Austin sniffled and his face twitched, as though he was trying to decide what to do. He ran his fingers through scraggy hair that was graying prematurely, and began to dawdle to the door.

Keeping her distance, looking for objects she could grab if he lashed out, Tally followed. Usually, once he started to cry, Austin would become morose and introspective. Their boss, Derek Wisebaum, had tried to help, but in the end, cutting him loose was their only option. Even then, Derek was worried he would try to hurt her. Derek told her he was trying to get Austin into treatment.

“You want me to call a cab?”

He turned to her, his eyes full of shame. “God, I’m sorry, Tal. I’m so fucked up, aren’t I? So. Fucked. Up. Oh, God, let me stay. Please... just tonight.”

The hairs prickled on the back of her neck at the thought of Austin prowling around while she slept. “No. Come on, I’ll—”

“I’ll sleep here, downstairs. On the couch. I’m *sooo* tired.”

“No, Austin.”

“You’re afraid of me, aren’t you? Scared I’ll sneak up and rape you? Slit your throat or something? You know, you are one fucking gutless bitch!”

“I’m not afraid of you, Austin.” Keeping her voice steady was difficult.

“Hah, you think that Aikido crap would save you? No chance! Wanna know how many men I’ve killed with a knife? Eight. You’d be easy fillet.”

She lifted the phone handset on her grandmother's antique cherry dresser she kept in the hall.

“What are you doing?” His expression changed again, his eyes narrowing, a dark frown appearing above his nose.

“Calling your mom.”

“The fuck you are. You’re fuckin’ calling the cops, aren’t you, you lying cunt.”

That was when she knew. When he used that word. She spun around and ran, just as he lashed out. He tackled her, slapping the handset away. It flew across the floor as he rammed her against the wall. His fist pounded against her cheek and the blinding flash made her miss seeing his second punch, into her gut. She backed away with her hands covering her face as his fists landed like rocks. She tried to stay on her feet to avoid his kicks but lost her balance and fell to the floor, trying not to make any sound. That would only provoke him more. If he grabbed her around the neck with those hands....

He kicked. Somehow the blow missed her head and connected with her shoulder. He laughed and said something Tally couldn’t make out, then grabbed her hair and began dragging her towards the kitchen.

“I’m going to kill you! Then I’ll tell the world about the slick little operation you guys have going at the agency. The media’ll pay a fortune for that story...”

The sickly smell of his body odor wafted over her. She felt a sharp pain in her chest and wondered whether it was a pulled muscle or broken rib, or if she was having a heart attack. Her face was throbbing. Her scalp stung and she glimpsed a clump of her hair on the floor. A thought flashed that these might be her last moments of life; that she’d be found cold and alone, stabbed and gutted.

No! She wouldn’t let it happen. She mustn’t let Austin reach the kitchen where the long

knives were primed in the block. He kept yanking her like he was pulling up an anchor chain. A few more feet. She had to move.

Now.

With both hands, she reached up and grabbed the hand holding her hair. As she had anticipated, Austin reacted by raising his fist to punch her again. But she was ready. She drew her knees up and released the full force of her legs in an upward kick into his crotch. She missed, but the unexpected attack stunned him long enough for her to follow up with two quick punches to his crotch that struck home. He uttered a string of expletives as he doubled up, coughing and collapsed to the floor, grunting from the crippling pain.

Struggling to her feet, she kicked her bare heel into his face. Again and again. Blood spurted from his broken nose and mouth, but he was far from done. He got a punch to her ribs, and as she staggered with the pain, he scrambled backwards into the kitchen. Cursing her, spitting blood.

She reached behind the dresser and pulled out the Glock she had taped there, just as he reappeared with a carving knife. If he saw the gun he ignored it in his rage.

“You are so fucking dead, bitch.”

He charged forward, the knife raised.

She fired three times. Center of chest. No taking chances.

He fell, still gripping the knife. The tip of the blade slammed down into a floorboard just in front of her. She scrambled away from the pooling blood and took a few minutes to get back her self-control, before finding her cell phone.

The voice was croaky, woken from a deep sleep. “Wisebaum.”

She spoke in short breaths, trying to ignore the shooting pain in her side. “Austin’s dead. You were right, Derek. He came after me with a knife. Blamed me for everything. I tried to.... He left me no choice.”

“Drive over here if you can manage it. Leave your garage remote under the mat. I’ll arrange a cleanup team.”

“Thanks. *Now* can we forget about having a soldier on the team?”

“They’re not all like Austin, Tal. We must have a soldier. The director has mandated it. And anyway, I’ve already recruited a replacement. Judging by his track record, this guy’ll be perfect.”

8

The Princess Aliya was berthed four hundred yards out to avoid a coral reef. From the upper deck, Ziad inhaled from his cigarette as he watched the helicopter Khalid was flying turn towards the Yubani Resort. Ignoring the men moving supplies along the jetty to the maintenance compound, he switched his gaze to the movement on the deck below, where a photo shoot was underway. He was always intrigued by the ability of the models to smile with a seemingly genuine warmth. Because when Ziad smiled, he felt nothing.

Bill Fanning joined him on deck, adjusting his cap against the burning mid-morning sun. “Strange how Sheik Khalid loves the helicopter, but hates the submarine,” he said as the machine passed over the crater ridge out of sight.

“Not so, Bill, when you understand the bad experience that His Highness has had. I doubt he’d even have this ship, except that his father signed it over to him six years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware. You wanted to see me, Ziad?”

“Yes, Bill. I thought you could use a distraction now that your hard work is finished. Marianne is magnificent, is she not?” he said, leaning over for a better view.

On the deck below, Marianne was on her hands and knees, wearing nothing but her smile. Her face, with its Snow White complexion and brilliant blue eyes, was turned back over her shoulder towards the camera.

“Oh, well, of course. I... I’ve never seen a redhead from this angle before,” Fanning said. “But... she seems so... young.”

“Ah, perhaps because she has been shaved, Bill. But surely, with a Thai wife who looks about twelve, you would understand that young meat is the most tender?” He ignored Fanning’s horrified glance and sputtered protests. “That’s why Sheik Khalid has half a million subscribers paying thirty dollars a month on his website. Anyway, all our girls sign a form that says they’re eighteen. Keeps the American censors happy.” He gestured at the other models lounging by the pool, where three assistants were busy brushing hair, applying makeup and touching up areas the photographer wanted smoothed of hair. “Which one would you like, Bill? Any except Marianne, of course. The one you choose will remain with you while His Highness is entertaining his guests. As with previous banquets, you are required to stay on board the *Princess Aliya*.”

“You’re very kind as always, Ziad, but I’ll be seeing Mai soon enough.”

“What, you didn’t enjoy the model from the last photo shoot? As I recall, you were smiling for days...”

Fanning turned away but said nothing.

“That must have been two months ago, at least. Two months without a woman? I couldn’t last two weeks. You know, Bill, I haven’t been home to Karachi to see my two wives in almost a year...”

Fanning turned to face him. “Oh. You must miss them.”

Ziad shrugged, then laughed. “It’s no wonder they’re still both without child. But now I’m more concerned about you, Bill. You must exercise *all* your muscles. I insist! These girls are just playthings to indulge our fantasies. What we do with them is of no consequence.” The ship’s cat, Fez, was rubbing itself against his leg, meowing for attention. Ziad picked it up and stroked it until it proved its independence by wriggling out of his arms. He liked cats. They never cowed to anyone, and were clever at manipulating people to get what they wanted. That was a characteristic worthy of respect.

“Once we do the final inspection and sign off, I’ll be out of your hair,” Fanning said. “I trust His Highness is looking forward to the handover?”

“He inspected the resort and the operating theatres with Dr. Xi yesterday. He’s happy to sign off on the resort itself, which leaves only the fortress. You will lead the inspection.” Ziad flicked the remains of the cigarette into the sea.

“Excellent!” Fanning looked pleased. “It’s been almost six months since His Highness has been underground. And he has never entered the fortress through the sea tunnel in the submarine. I would recommend that His Highness be able to operate the sub in an emergency, just as you have done.”

Ziad chuckled and ran his fingers through his hair. “His Highness prays for Allah’s grace. Captain Jergah has trained him on the submarine. Do not concern yourself about that, Bill...”

“You were saying that he had a bad experience?” Fanning said.

Ziad leaned forward for a better view of Marianne. She ignored him as she demonstrated her creativity with a jewel-encrusted *khanjar*, the dagger’s handle enveloped by the folds of her womanhood. “Bitch. See how she pretends not to see me. She’s a tease.” He would give her a lesson in respect later. “The Americans waterboarded him, Bill. Years ago, when he was living

in Qatar after he'd been exiled. A mistake. They were after someone else. But they did not even apologize. His Highness does not forget. In the eleven years I have worked for him, he does not forget anyone who has done wrong by him."

"Goodness. How awful." Fanning put his hands on the rail and stretched. Shook his head and was silent for a moment. "Certainly, I understand."

"So Bill, now you must choose a girl. I'm sure she will make a pleasurable confinement."

9

Picketing strikers were blocking the way when McCloud drove through Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique. From their placards it appeared they were protesting stringent economic cuts impacting on social services in Martinique and other French overseas *départments*. Mac detoured through narrow streets that were like the movie set of a ramshackle French village. The Creole influence was evident in the street vendors, the spicy food, the peeling gaudy paintwork, and mismatching architecture, all of which gave the place a sort of New Orleans feel. He parked the Peugeot in the hospital car park, below a sign advertising Bière Lorraine, the “Beer of the Caribbean.” The girl holding a bottle to her mouth had a mischievous smile.

The hospital was long corridors of featureless concrete and white tiles with dozens of patients occupying gurneys parked end to end. A pretty orderly flirted with him in French as she showed him to a patient garden flourishing with lush ginger and colorful hibiscus, a sharp contrast to the concrete buildings surrounding it. Patients wandered about or sat in wheelchairs, and many seemed to have bad coughs. Six nurses were enjoying a smoke break behind a clump of bamboo.

He spotted Bob in a wheelchair, his left leg supported by a frame. It wasn't plastered, which was a good sign. Elena, sitting next to him, gave Mac a weary smile. The strain of the last two weeks showed on her face and in her bloodshot eyes. She was an attractive woman of Italian heritage, and Sophia had inherited her dark hair, almond-shaped hazel eyes, olive skin and full lips. Elena and Bob raised their three children as good Catholics, and whenever Mac was invited to dinner one of the kids would always say grace before the meal. El's cannelloni, made to her grandmother's recipe, was Mac's favorite. Sophia, Wade and Maddie were all respectful and faithful, but even though Mac was Sophia's godfather, his experience fighting terrorists had hardened his cynicism about religion. Sometimes he even wondered whether there could be a God at all, the things people did in the name of their faith.

Being a midwife, Elena would probably want to get Bob out of hospital and home as soon as possible, so she could give him her own brand of TLC. She was Bob's rock, and Mac had seen her maintain a calm demeanor in even the roughest weather. He removed his sunglasses and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Hello, Mac,” she said softly, taking his hands. “Thanks for coming. This must be hard on you, too.”

He almost lost it at that point. El was such a kind, loving human being that even with her daughter abducted, she was worried about how *he* felt. That was beyond anything he could comprehend. His voice cracked. “She’s been like a baby sister to me. It’s like losing Cynthia all over again.” He shook his head, unable to meet her gaze. “Sorry... This is not about me.”

Elena reached up and put her arms around him. They hugged for a long time. When they separated, both had tears in their eyes. Mac turned to Bob. “And how’s the patient?”

“Fine. I’m fine, Mac,” Bob muttered, waving his hand dismissively. “You sure got here fast. What happened at the hearing?”

“I’ve left the Army.”

“Oh, Mac, I’m so sorry,” said Elena. “Or is that what you wanted?”

Bob growled: “Course it’s not, El. Did your lawyer cut a deal, Mac?”

“More or less. Look, don’t worry about me. Let’s focus on finding Sophia.”

“You’ll keep.” Bob eyeballed him for a moment.

“How are Wade and Maddie coping?”

Elena gazed up at the sky and took a deep breath. “Not well. Nonna is staying with them. Maddie’s taken a few days from college, but she needs to be busy. Wade’s not coping at all well. He’s the same age you were when Cynthia was taken, so you can understand how he’s feeling.” She ignored the tears rolling down her cheeks and put a hand on Bob’s leg. “Mac, we need to get him home, where I can look after him. This place is full of dengue fever and flu. The staff are barely able to cope. Marvin thinks Bob should stop playing amateur detective, and I have to agree. You’re a *teacher*, Bob. We have two other children... You want them to lose their papa, as well as their sister?”

“Jesus, you think I don’t care about that?” Bob said, turning to face Mac. “The FBI’s not moving fast enough. It’s just not a priority for them. And Sophia could be...” He choked on his words. “Look, Mac, the guy is here,” he said. “I’m sure of it. I’ve found the Frenchman. The bastard who took the girls.”

Mac crouched down. “Just hold on a second, Bob. First up, how about you tell me what happened. Then we’ll discuss what we do next. I have a few days before I start my new job.”

“The Gendarmerie want us to leave,” Elena said, taking Bob’s hand. “It was a mugging

gone wrong, they believe.”

“Bullshit!” Bob said, pulling his hand away. “Let *me* tell him. I was in Juarez following up leads, right, when a mechanic at the airport tells me about this incident, *two days* after those assholes grabbed Sophia and Danni. He was on night shift, but there was no work. He was just sitting around, reading. Some time after midnight, he sees an unmarked 737 fly in and taxi to the hangar next door. Next thing, he hears some screaming or crying or something. So, he decides he’s getting out of there, right? Figures it’s drugs or something. But as he’s leaving, out of curiosity he peers through a crack and sees guys with guns hustling young kids onto the plane. I show him a photo of Sophia, and guess what. He crosses himself. Starts crying. He’ll never forget her face, he says.”

That sounded a little suspicious. “He must have been close to get such a good look.”

“Apparently the lights in the hangars are very bright. Like daylight. Have to be.”

“Figures. Okay, so…”

“So, I traced the flight and it led here. Asked around at the airport. There’s a pilot who lives here, name of Jean-Baptiste Bernase. A freelancer. Lives over the other side of the island, overlooking the sea. The house is isolated, at the end of a long gravel track. Wire fence around the house. He refused to answer my questions, even after I explained I wasn’t a cop. Why would he do that if he had nothing to hide? This guy’s French. He’s got to be The Frenchman.”

“Maybe. What other evidence have you got?”

Bob gave a snort. “Anyway, the night after I spoke to him, as I was walking along the esplanade after dinner, I heard a crack and felt something slam into the back of my leg. First I thought someone had thrown a rock. Then I felt the blood.”

Bob handed the slug to him. It was a .22. Mac figured the guy was just warning him off. Mac rolled it in his fingers.

“Did the Gendarmerie interview him?”

“Briefly. He admitted to piloting the charter, but said he was just ferrying an empty plane for the owners. He voluntarily showed them inside the house, apparently. They found nothing.”

“Without a warrant, they probably didn’t look too hard.”

“There was something else. When I first drove up to his house, I saw three young girls playing outside. They ran inside when they saw my car.”

“His kids?”

“There’s no wife, according to the cops. And these girls looked like they could be Latinas. Sophia and Danni could well be locked up inside that house.”

10

Sophia was trying to forget their troubles by playing volleyball on the beach with seven of the other teenagers, supervised by the guards who demanded they all took regular exercise. About two weeks earlier, the *Princess Aliya* had berthed at this place their guards referred to as the Yubani Resort, on the island of Andaran, and the kids had been herded off the boat along the long jetty to this camp, a fenced compound of wooden cabins and maintenance buildings with a razor-wire-topped chain-link fence on two sides, sheer cliffs to the east, and the sea to the north. Armed guards who spoke very little English patrolled day and night. There was no escape. The guards provided food and ordered them to shower at the same time after breakfast every morning. Cleanliness was apparently important to these people, whoever they were.

After a few days, the captives had settled into the routine. But there was always the unknown, hanging over their heads like a sword. They were fed well and treated kindly enough by their dark-skinned guards, except for one occasion when one of the boys, Greg, had gone for a swim and the guards had apparently thought he'd been attempting to escape. They had beaten him with bamboo sticks, with the other children crying, pleading with them to stop, until he lay on the sand bloody and bruised.

Nobody went swimming after that.

Greg spiked the ball over the net into the sand. Erika called out the score: twenty-eighteen. As Sophia stomped through the sand to fetch the ball, she glimpsed four guards striding through the gate that divided their prison from the maintenance buildings. She felt her skin go cold and called a warning to Danni, who was a little way down the beach making a sandcastle with Carmel. The little eight-year-old had adopted her and Danni as substitute mothers. Danni grabbed Carmel's hand and they hurried over towards the group.

Two of the guards were carrying some fresh robes. The leading guard waved at them, pointed at the shower hut. "Shower! Shower!"

Sophia heard another sound and turned towards the ocean. A launch had appeared around the headland and was headed towards the beach. She sensed that something was about to happen. And they were being cleaned and prepared for the occasion, like lambs to the slaughter.

Around at the resort itself, Khalid smiled at his sister as they watched from an observation room above the operating theatre. On one table, a metal retractor held the recipient's chest open like a clamshell, exposing the withered, blackened lungs of a sixty-two year old man who'd smoked every day for the last fifty years. On the other table, Dr. Xi was removing the lungs from the donor's exposed chest.

"...And so the risks are significantly reduced because we are using lungs from a live donor," Dr. Xi explained as he made delicate incisions inside the recipient's chest cavity. "More importantly, in this case the donor has the same blood type and a compatible serotype as the recipient. This reduces the risk of organ rejection and the need for immune-suppression drugs, which often have serious side effects, including cancer and infections. And it is much better not to use anesthetic drugs, of course, so as not to weaken the transplant organ."

"Excellent. Please continue, Dr. Xi," said Khalid. He turned to Rubi. "This is the solution we have been seeking for our father."

Rubi took his hand and squeezed it, and nodded, without taking her eyes off the operation below.

Dr. Xi continued his description of the operation. "As you know, the donor we are using today is a healthy fourteen-year-old Australian boy. Since we severed the spinal cord, he can feel nothing below the neck, although he is still fully conscious. He is listening to music while the ventilator assists his breathing. Now that we have extracted his lungs, we simply switch off the ventilator. He will die peacefully within seconds."

11

Bob hadn't mentioned the two Dobermans, each probably a hundred pounds of muscle and teeth. And he hadn't mentioned that the fence was electrified. That was what confronted Mac after he had tramped the last soggy mile along the wheel-rut track in the dark, in drizzly rain, with a pack on his back, binoculars around his neck, and his camera under his rain jacket. Along the northeast boundary, a one-hundred-foot cliff dropped to the Caribbean Sea, and he decided to take the scrubby track inland from the house to prevent the dogs scenting him. The rain would also reduce the dogs' ability to detect his presence, and probably ensure they remained inside. But after Bob's visit, the pilot would be sure to be on guard.

The rain eased. Through his binoculars he could see Bernase sitting at the table while the three girls served dinner. They stood while he ate. Their slight bodies suggested the girls were closer to fourteen than twenty-four, and Bernase's groping suggested they probably weren't his daughters. There was no sign of any older woman who might be their mother. The two dogs loped around the room as if they were on guard duty.

These girls could easily be captives, confined by the electrified fence, guarded by dogs, and controlled by threats to them or their families. He'd witnessed subjugated and abused women in Afghanistan, and he reminded himself that he mustn't assume that these girls would help him, even if they were slaves. Girls the Taliban had kidnapped to rape for entertainment sometimes suffered from Stockholm syndrome and fought their rescuers.

After he'd finished eating, Bernase rose from the table and appeared on the patio, speaking into a phone, occasionally nodding his head as he spoke. Mac wondered if Bernase could be The Frenchman. Certainly, the evidence was pointing that way, but it didn't seem right that the pilot would also be the organizer of the trafficking ring. Still, if he had slaves himself...

The Dobermans sniffed the air, and growled. The wind direction was quite variable and they may have sensed something unfamiliar, perhaps for a moment. Bernase looked at the dogs for a moment, but didn't seem concerned. As he was speaking, Bernase unzipped and pissed into the rain. After he'd finished he yelled out a name.

One of the girls hurried out while the other two sat down to eat. The girl slipped off the spaghetti straps and her dress fell to the patio. She wore nothing under. She knelt in front of

Bernase and played with him for a while, then when he was hard she took him in her mouth. Incredibly, the pilot continued to speak on the phone. After it was over, the girl gathered up her dress and returned inside and sat down to eat her meal.

Mac shook his head at what he'd just witnessed. In Afghanistan, he'd had to stand by and observe in silence at some appalling treatment of women by their menfolk, but he'd never witnessed anyone behave quite so offhandedly as the way this guy had just done. If these girls were slaves, he knew exactly what he would do to Bernase.

Bernase lit a cigar and one of the other girls brought him a steaming drink. Soon after, he went inside and reappeared with a suitcase. He spoke to the three girls, then stepped through a door out of sight. He was leaving!

Mac had to move fast. He hadn't expected Bernase to depart the house so soon. Slinging on his pack, he sprinted down to the gravel track, rain streaming down his face. Weighed up his limited options. The rental was almost a mile away, too far to reach before Bernase caught up and drove past. The track from the house offered no cover. He had no pistol; his heaviest weapon was the bolt-cutter he'd brought to get through the fence. That is, before he had discovered it was electrified. He yanked off his backpack, removed the bolt cutter, and continued to run as he slipped an arm back through one of the straps.

The headlight beams struck out through the sheeting rain like blurry lasers, angling back and forth as the vehicle negotiated the winding track. Mac stood between the wheel ruts of the track. The bolt-cutter was hidden behind his left leg.

He figured the pilot had three options: drive around him, hit him, or stop. He calculated that Bernase wouldn't just drive off and leave him there, but then he wouldn't want to run him down and risk damaging the car either. That meant he'd probably stop. And if he stopped, Bernase could either speak to him or shoot him (assuming he had a weapon). Either way, Mac was banking on Bernase stopping, maybe back a little to avoid an ambush. He would try to talk his way close enough to swing the bolt-cutter.

The headlights of the Peugeot 308 zapped him straight on, and he smiled, holding his thumb out. He was hiking the island and had gotten lost at night in the rain. Grateful to see a stranger with a warm, dry car. Maybe he would have gotten away with it, too, except that Bob had already been nosing around. Bernase obviously decided he wasn't taking any chances. Mac heard the engine gunning and saw the car slip out of the ruts, gravel spraying as the rear wheels

fishtailed. The front wheels reversed and the car revved in a controlled slide that had it heading side-on, straight at him.

The driver's window was facing him. Bernase brought up a gun and fired, trying to steer with his free hand as the rain blasted in, blinding him. Mac swung the bolt-cutter and released the missile with as much strength as he could muster. The cutting blades headed straight for Bernase's startled face. Mac jumped clear and landed in the mud, air bursting from his lungs. The vehicle rolled to a stop and he rushed over to it before Bernase could recover.

There was no movement, just the sound of the engine idling quietly and the rain. As he got close, he could see Bernase's head tilted back against the headrest, the bolt-cutter sticking out the window. The cutting blades had slammed into his mouth and continued on, opening at the back of his throat. Blood was spurting everywhere.

Damn! That wasn't the outcome he'd wanted. Although Bernase's actions made him feel partly vindicated. He left the .22 pistol on Bernase's lap and reached into the passenger side for the cell phone, wiping it clean of sticky blood on some wet grass. Hopefully, in the address book of the phone would be contact details that might help them track down Sophia and Danni. Next to a small container for coins, he spotted a remote.

He took off at a jog down the road toward his rental, then drove to Bernase's gate and pressed the remote. The gate opened. As he drove in, the dogs bounded off the front porch, jumping at his car, snarling and barking in a frenzy. He tooted the horn several times. After a few minutes, a curtain was pulled back and a face appeared. Then a light came on.

Finally, the front door opened a crack. It took him almost an hour to reassure them enough to lock up the dogs and allow him inside.

With Bob translating over the phone, he pieced together their story. The three girls, who were eighteen, fifteen and thirteen years old, were from different towns in Mexico. They'd been told their parents had sold them, although none believed it. The oldest one had been with Bernase almost a year. The other two had arrived three months ago on a private plane flown by Bernase. They knew nothing about other kidnapped girls. They just wanted to go home.

Mac sat on Bob's hospital bed as Bob went through Bernase's phone address book.

"Hey, what's the prefix for phone numbers in France, again?" Bob asked.

"Thirty-three."

Bob swiveled his wheelchair. “Here’s one. It’s a Paris number. Only a first name—Emil. Think I should call it?”

“No. Let me give it to my guy in Paris, Jogesh Khoury. He’ll trace the name and address through his Paris contacts.”

“Okay. Oh, El ran into your mother a few weeks back in the supermarket. Just before we went to Mexico for spring break. She said Susan was about to have her fourth. That you still hadn’t been to see any of your brother’s kids.”

Mac stiffened and turned away. This was not the time or place.

“Come on Mac, we discussed this a long time ago. Let it go. Nick’s the only sibling you’ve got.”

Mac stood up and looked squarely at Bob. He didn’t want to get angry with him, but it wasn’t fair for Bob to put this back on him. “I’m over it, Bob. It’s good they’re still together. But I can’t pretend.”

“You know, you don’t really appreciate how precious family really is until something happens...”

“Sorry. I know what you’re saying. But they knew exactly what they were doing when they decided to fuck four weeks out from my wedding to Susan. Pretty deep betrayal, Bob.”

Bob heaved a sigh and pinched his eyelid, as though it had a lash underneath.

Elena walked into the room. She’d clearly been crying. “Uh, the Mexican Consul’s taken care of it. The younger one didn’t...” A tear trickled down her cheek and she coughed slightly to compose herself. “...She didn’t want to let go of me. And I didn’t want to let go of her. They, uh, they said to thank you again. The Consul suggested we’d best leave, so I’ve booked us on a flight tomorrow.”

“Fine by me,” Bob said.

Elena slumped in a chair. “Tell me, do you think we will find our Sophia, Mac?”

“Let’s stay positive,” Mac said. What else could he say? His cell phone vibrated and he excused himself, walking out to the corridor. Caller ID said it was Derek Wisebaum, and he tried to head him off. “Don’t worry, Derek, I’m booked on a flight to Montreal tomorrow. You said I could have a few days—”

“Change of plans, Mac. One of my team’s come down with the fucking flu. You’re flying to Nice to substitute. I’ll brief you there.”

“Nice?”

“Nice. Côte d’Azur. South of France.”

“I know. But I’m in—”

“Martinique. Fort-de-France hospital. We know where you are, Mac.”

“Sure you do.” They were tracking the GPS on his phone. “And are you monitoring when I take a crap too?”

Wisebaum didn’t laugh. “You’re booked on the 8:45 a.m. flight to Miami and Lufthansa, departing 2:05 p.m. to Nice. Don’t be late.”

12

Khalid watched the helicopter swoop over the headland, squeezing under the cloud, caressing the palms that clung to the ridge a thousand feet above the Yubani Health Resort, then hovering briefly before landing gently on the resort's helipad. Water from yesterday's rain cascaded down the worn channels of black basalt that were tinted with slimy green algae. Khalid's final guest, Sheik Mahdi al-Mansur Abidi, stepped from the helicopter holding onto his robes, which blustered from the downdraft.

"*Salaam alaykum*, Khalid. Your pilot Assad is a crazy man." Abidi wiped the sweat from his forehead then grasped Khalid's arms and kissed his cheeks, briefly touching noses three times in the traditional ritual.

"*Wa alaykum as salaam. Marhaba*, brother," shouted Khalid above the helicopter's racket. "I'm honored to host such an esteemed guest."

Khalid noticed a big man with a shaved head step from the helicopter after Sheik Abidi. He rushed over and greeted his father's chief bodyguard. "Ibrahim! What are you doing here? Is my father with you?"

"No, Highness. I come alone. Your father sent me to you."

"But why, my old friend? Why would my father send you here, now?"

Ibrahim seemed reluctant to speak further. "It is a private matter, Highness. It will wait until the festivities are over." The giant bodyguard bowed slightly and walked off towards the group of other bodyguards.

Khalid and Abidi continued along the beach to where five goat-hair tents were flying the Yubani crest—a five-pointed star with a crescent moon like a saucer underneath. They entered the *majlis*, where rugs with embroidered silk tassels covered the walls, and ruby and gold striped parachutes billowed from the ceiling. The twelve guests who had flown in from around the world reclined against earthy-colored cushions on silk rugs covering the sand, as the sixteen models from the photo shoot wearing white bikinis served trays of food, poured wine, and brought Shisha pipes of apple-flavored tobacco.

Khalid stood at his place at a long, low table and spread his palms wide to address his guests. "Brothers, now that we are all here, I am honored to bid you welcome. Today's meeting

of the Brotherhood coincides with the opening of my Yubani Health Resort, the most exclusive hospital in the world. The resort will offer the world's first on-demand transplant service, using an expert team led by Dr. Yong Xi."

Dr. Xi rose in his place and received a warm round of applause.

"I realized a few years ago when I saw my father's condition that there are many older people wanting the lifeline that a new organ can provide. The resort is unique in *guaranteeing* organ availability from donors who are young, fit, and healthy, rather than from those having suffered traumatic death. With the ever-increasing population of millionaires over the age of sixty, demand is likely to outstrip supply for decades. They have the money to pay, and many don't care where the lifeline comes from. After all, what's a few less teenagers in the world?"

Laughter from the guests.

"Now, please welcome our respected brother, Sheik Abidi, Chairman of the Hunnafite Brotherhood."

The billionaire property developer from the Emirates rose to his feet and regarded the other guests with an imperious air.

"Put me on your waiting list, please, Khalid. I would say in about twenty years!" Abidi waited for the laughter to die down. "First, I would express our gratitude to our entrepreneurial brother Khalid and his father, Prince Abu-Bakr, for making the *Princess Aliya* available to deliver the cargoes that help to make us rich. The Hunnafite Brotherhood now has sixty members from around the world, each with assets over five hundred million dollars. By working together, since last year we have increased the value of our financial assets by thirty-five percent, mostly by buying devalued US assets at bargain prices. We have lifted our profits from drug distribution by fifteen percent. Our global slave trade has grown a massive thirty percent just in the last year. The Westerners remain blind fools as we continue to take over their wealth. Brothers, the last laugh will be ours!"

The other guests applauded warmly. Abidi continued at length about the Hunnafite strategies that would see their members own one tenth of the world's assets within twenty-five years.

"In conclusion, we will continue to finance groups like Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab, which will force the West to pour money into their militaries so we can sell weapons to their enemies. In the next twelve months, we will manipulate the oil price and create another collapse in stock

prices so that we can buy up more. We will advise you when to sell, before the crash. Now, it is time to enjoy ourselves.” He sat back down, amid strong applause.

Khalid cried out: “And now, the magnificent Sheriti!”

From behind the curtain came the slow, haunting melody of a *mizmar*, the Egyptian oboe, crying a traditional ballad. Sheriti appeared from the opposite side of the tent. Her *bedleh* comprised only two garments—a bejeweled bra and diaphanous harem pants—allowing the guests a full appraisal of her physique. Khalid felt a twinge of jealousy as she moved among them, her jade green eyes seducing each one, but he felt an even stronger sense of power. Sheriti was spectacular. And his alone. Yet Sheriti’s massage sessions were not enough to quench his thirst for her, and although she had made it clear in accepting the job as his personal trainer that it would not involve sex, Khalid had other intentions in mind.

Sheriti began to glide on her bare feet and sway her hips back and forth like a belly dancer, slowly and sensually at first, as her curvaceous bosom jiggled in time with the music. Her amber skin sparkled from the light reflected off the mica particles sprayed over her body, and her shaved mound was visible through the transparent material below the five-carat ruby in her navel. The harem pants rode so low on her waist they seemed to defy gravity as her hips gyrated to the erotic melody of the *mizmar*. Khalid’s eyes were locked on her belly and he was fully aroused, bewitched by Sheriti’s seductive moves. The tempo quickened and Sheriti stepped up to match its pace. Her belly undulated in waves, faster, faster, until at the beat’s peak, it quivered like a vibrating loudspeaker, her hips thrusting back and forth simulating the sex act. She cried out, and the drummer commenced a long roll. Sheriti did two fast turns and, on the clash of the cymbal, dropped to one knee, head bowed low.

There were shouts from the guests. Cheering. A standing ovation. Sheriti raised an arm in salute, exchanged a glancing smile with Khalid, then rose to her feet and clapped her hands. The sixteen models from Eastern Europe appeared in their *bedleh* and started their version of Sheriti’s belly dance. The models had been paid well for their photographic sessions and for their participation at the banquet, and they each knew their duties included entertaining one of Khalid’s guests for their evening’s pleasure.

“Where did you find Sheriti?” an exuberant Sheik Fakhouri asked Khalid. “She is magnificent! She looks Egyptian. Is she a slave?”

He knew where this conversation was headed and capped it quickly. “She is from your

country, yes. She can turn any man's dagger into a mighty sword, neh? But she is not mine to offer. She's in my employ as long as she is respected by my men and guests. I'm sure one of the models dancing now will be a sufficiently pleasurable target for your spear. Or if none of the models appeals, you may wish to simply purchase one of the slaves we are about to auction?"

"Of course, brother." Fakhouri nodded his head with a sideways tilt, indicating his understanding, and turned to consider which of the models he might select.

After the models had completed their dance, they lined up and the guests each made their selection in order of seniority, Sheik Abidi selecting first. Once the selections had been made, the models exited the tent, giggling among themselves. They would be returned to the *Princess Aliya* to prepare.

Khalid stood and clapped his hands with a flourish. "And now, what some of you have come all this way for, brothers, the auction of our latest shipment of twenty-four beautiful young slaves from around the world!"

A flap wall of the *majlis* was opened up to reveal a stage on which two men waited, holding long bamboo canes in case any of the slaves was uncooperative.

Ziad was standing beside the stage to introduce the auction. "Brothers, you have a detailed profile of each slave in the folder beside you, so I'll begin. Remember, all profits from the auction will go to supporting our Taliban brothers as they work hard to extend the Afghan conflict with the Americans and NATO. Our first offering is pretty Erika, from Sweden."

A hand pulled open a curtain at the side and a girl with blonde braids and a round, frightened face was shoved forward onto the stage. The simple robe showed the girl's well-developed breasts but otherwise veiled her shape. Her downcast eyes were highlighted with eyeliner that gave her eyes a Cleopatra slant. She adopted the pose she had been ordered, offering a nervous smile, although she was clearly trembling.

"Erika is sixteen, and was taken in Mexico City where she was an exchange student. Dr. Gammal has confirmed that she is a virgin, as indeed all of the girls on offer are. Erika would make an excellent concubine or household slave."

The men behind Erika on the stage each grabbed one side of her robe and dragged it up over her head, leaving her naked. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she opened her lips to show her teeth, then slowly did a full turn and shuffled back and forth across the stage.

"Now, brothers, what am I bid for pretty Erika?" Ziad called out, above the guest's

chatter.

Sindoro Tekawati, a short, silver-haired manufacturer from Indonesia, strode over to the stage and squeezed the girl's breasts and tweaked her nipples, then smacked her bottom, much to the amusement of the other guests. Erika flinched, but didn't move, as all of the slaves had been instructed, under threat of the rod.

Ziad smiled at his own astuteness. Erika was the most compliant of the older slaves, which is why he had put her first.

"Bigger breasts than any of my wives," Tekawati said, to hoots and catcalls. "One fifty."

"She's older than the girl my father recently married, but she'd be good around the house. And for my son," said Bashir Alsadh, a wealthy industrialist from Bangladesh. "Two hundred thousand."

Tekawati came right back at him. "Two twenty."

"Two fifty," bid Mazen Bardai, taking a suck of his apple-flavored tobacco. "I've never had a concubine from Sweden."

There was a pause. Tekawati shrugged. There were plenty more slaves to be had.

"Sold!" said Ziad. He wasted no time stringing out the bidding. Any slaves not sold would be used for transplants or as practice subjects for Dr. Xi and his team.

A second girl was escorted in. She had a proud expression and walked holding her head high, despite her wide eyes betraying her fear. She struggled as the men attempted to remove her gown. One of the guards swished the bamboo across her buttocks twice. She gasped, but retained her feet and attempted to cover herself as the men dragged the gown over her head, earning her two more whips of the cane across the backs of her legs.

"Why are you people doing this?" she yelled. "What sort of animals are you?"

Ziad shouted at one of the guards "Gag her. Make sure she stays still."

Khalid smiled. This one was pretty, and would fetch a good price. His guests were enjoying the girl's feisty struggle, clapping and cheering as the guards struggled to shove a gag in her mouth and restrain her arms behind her back. This would only add to her worth. The girl stubbornly glared above the guests at the wall of the majlis. Not as beautiful as Sheriti, perhaps, but the face was nicely-rounded, with sensuous eyes and full lips, a small, straight nose. Her forehead rose gracefully straight up to the hairline where her unrestrained hazel hair flowed over delicate sculptured shoulders. Her long legs, well-proportioned body and perfectly round breasts

with tiny pink nipples would also add to her value. Which one was she, he wondered?

“Brothers, our second item is presented for your enjoyment only,” Ziad called out in his auctioneer tone, wiping the spittle from his mouth. “Sophia is sixteen and, like Erika, was sourced in Mexico, where she was taken while on vacation. Sophia has been presold, so she will not be opened for bidding.”

Khalid frowned. Sophia was reserved for his father’s lung transplant, and should not have been put on display. He was about to order Ziad to remove her when beside him, Bogdan Brazhlov, one of the new strongmen of the Russian Mafia, elbowed him and called out to the gathering.

“What a waste!” Brazhlov, a hairy bull of a man, turned to Khalid. “But this one is too pretty to be presold, Khalid. It is not right! You must allow us to bid for her.”

Khalid smiled but said nothing. He tried to signal Ziad, but his security chief was staring at the naked girl.

Shinji Azakawa sat up on his cushions and said: “I agree. The girl is quite lovely. I offer one million dollars for her right now.”

“What?” Brazhlov stood up. “One point two,” he countered.

Other guests murmured their support for the girl to be auctioned. Khalid began to feel uneasy. Despite her beauty, the girl was nothing but two lungs waiting to be removed for his father. What was Ziad thinking displaying her like this?

“Take her back to the compound,” Khalid ordered, signaling to Ziad to keep the auction moving. “Brothers, I apologize for our brother Ziad, who has unwittingly teased us. This girl is to be used in a week or two for my father’s lung transplant. We have been seeking a suitable donor for almost three years. I regret she is not available for sale. Next!”

A teenage boy in chains was dragged into the tent and thrown to the ground. There were murmurs of disappointment as Sophia was taken from the tent, but the rebellion subsided, to Khalid’s relief.

“Next we have Gregory, from Florida, aged thirteen, and Gregory’s sister, Carmel, aged eight,” said Ziad, as Rubi led a tearful little blonde, blue-eyed girl into the tent. Gregory was sold to the Russian and Carmel was sold to the Indonesian, Tekawati, for a little over one million dollars.

The auction took little over an hour. The highest price paid was \$1.5 million for Cindy, a

thirteen-year-old from London with alabaster skin and Baltic blue eyes, whom Sheik Abidi purchased as a coming-of-manhood gift for his fifteen-year-old son.

They took a fifteen-minute break while the slave purchases were finalized. Nine of the slaves would remain on Andaran pending forthcoming transplant operations. Every guest had his own aircraft parked waiting at Andaran Airport, and would fly out tomorrow with their slaves, and possibly in some cases, their selected model. After previous banquets, some of his guests had persuaded their model to accompany them and, in most cases, those girls were never heard from again.

“And now, it is time for the Conversion Ritual,” Khalid said. “Sheik Abidi will clarify the rules for our two new guests as we make our way along to the specially-prepared tent. The five of you who have chosen not to participate or observe will be taken back to the *Princess Aliya*.”

“The Ritual has its genesis in the victory of Islam over the Crusaders,” Abidi explained as the group walked to the specially prepared tent. “When Islamic warriors defeated Christians in a battle, the males were given the choice of converting to Islam or being put to the sword. Females were forced to submit to the warriors until they accepted conversion or died. As you will see, the girl has been told that she can stop the ritual at any time by accepting Allah. In most cases, conversion is achieved within the first hour. Occasionally some choose not to save themselves.”

Khalid ushered the guests participating in the ritual into the tent and joined Rubi and two other guests seated in the observation area. Those participating were dressed in a simple white modesty robe. There was a flurry of movement as a girl with fair skin and chestnut hair, dressed in a white robe, was dragged inside. She had a collar around her neck, and was handcuffed. She held an expression of defiance as she took in her surroundings, her protests muted by the duct tape over her mouth.

Ziad threw his cigarette onto the sand and cleared his throat. “This is Danni, sixteen years old, from Boston, who was captured in Mexico with her friend Sophia, who you saw briefly earlier. This girl is a devout Christian and a virgin. And we have discovered that her father was one of the American occupiers in the first invasion of Iraq. Today we will avenge our Arab brothers! Participants will take the order as drawn.”

The guests applauded enthusiastically.

The girl’s handcuffs were removed and she was stripped of her robe before being lifted onto a specially constructed steel frame with a leather sling. She was suspended face down in a

way that would allow the participant to swing her body back and forth, standing either between her legs or in front of her face. She was bound by her wrists and ankles, and the duct tape over her mouth was replaced by a device that prevented her closing her teeth.

Bogdan Brazhlov positioned himself behind the girl. He raised his robe, declining to use the proffered condom. He was a big man—barrel-chested, no neck, and his extensively tattooed body was hairy as a gorilla. Khalid was repulsed. Brazhlov grabbed the girl's hair and pulled her head back, causing her to gag on her bindings. He grinned as he thrust into her, the girl crying out in obvious pain. The Russian ignored her, clearly enjoying himself, grunting each time he rammed forward. After a few minutes he withdrew and shifted his position slightly. The girl shook her head in obvious panic, and when Brazhlov pushed again, the girl's face contorted in pain and she let out a long scream. She kept howling each time he thrust, which seemed only to excite the Russian more. Blood began to drip onto the sand. After several minutes he bellowed in Russian and withdrew his withered penis. He squeezed the girl's buttocks until she cried out again, then rejoined the others, blustering his satisfaction.

As Mazen Bardai positioned himself, Khalid studied the girl's face. Despite the obvious fear and the pain, the girl had once again steeled herself defiantly, and was mumbling to herself.

Sheik Abidi spoke in a formal tone. "Danni, do you renounce all other faiths and accept Allah as the one true God?"

The girl shook her head vigorously, and raised her voice as she tried to speak despite her mouth restraint. Khalid began to understand the words she was mumbling. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

"The ritual will continue." Sheik Abidi nodded to the next man, Mazen Bardai.

It was early yet in the ritual. He left the tent and found Ibrahim and the two men walked down the beach towards the jetty where the girl's cries became less intrusive. "Ibrahim, what's this about? Surely you should be in Dubai protecting him."

"I did not wish to leave your father's side, of course. But he still has Abdul and Farouk guarding him, and they are good men. But your father has given me important information he wants to protect. He has been receiving threats, and asked that I come to you. He believes you, also, may be in some danger and need my protection. But he has also sent me here so that if anything happens to him, I will give you the information your father wishes you to have on his death."

“Who is making these threats?”

Ibrahim rubbed his chin. “As you know, your father has many secrets, and many enemies from the past. He believes that whoever is making these threats is so powerful that no matter how many guards he has, they could kill him if they wish. He wants you to know that if anything happens to him, I will reveal details about a special cargo that he wishes to be entrusted to you. This secret cargo is the reason he financed the construction of the underground fortress here.”

“He told me as much. But he was waiting until he came to inspect the facility we’ve built here to tell me the details.” Khalid stopped at the end of the jetty and turned to face Ibrahim.

“Why hasn’t father mentioned these threats when I’ve called?”

“He believes his phones are monitored. And there is another reason he sent me to you.” Ibrahim lowered his voice. “He wanted me to warn you personally that there may be a traitor on your staff.”

13

Mac stepped out onto the balcony of his room at the Negresco, overlooking the palms along the Promenade Des Anglais, beside the pebble beach and the Mediterranean Sea of Nice, on the Côte d'Azur. He handed Wisebaum the signed confidentiality agreement. The contract of engagement was inside on the table, still unsigned.

“More paperwork here than enlisting in the army. You realize that just because I agreed to leave the army doesn't mean I'm just going blindly along with some group I know nothing about. Even if you're government, I'm not penning my name to any contract until I know what I'm signing on for,” he said. He had no reason to trust Wisebaum, given the circumstances.

Wisebaum put on his round glasses. “Of course. And just for the record, Mac, I counseled against having you on my team. Nothing personal. Loose cannons are... loose cannons.”

As if to emphasize the point, a squealing of tires came from the street and Mac braced for the crash that didn't come. The men glanced at each other and chuckled. Wisebaum headed back inside and he followed.

“So why am I here?” Mac asked.

Wisebaum's shoulders lifted a fraction. “For the chance to prove me wrong, for a start. You have... certain skills we could benefit from. Your field and weapons capabilities. And your olive complexion is easy enough to pass off in a crowd in the Middle East, where we mostly work. Your personality—slightly on the introvert side, I think. And the best spies are introverts, according to the experts at the Company. Anyway, the Director feels you have the qualifications he's looking for to train our guys, who're mostly a bunch of shiny pants.”

“So you *are* CIA.”

“Was.” Wisebaum checked the confidentiality agreement and witnessed the signature, then tossed the document into his briefcase. Sat down on the chair by the bed. “Okay, listen up. One of the first actions of the new Administration was to issue a Presidential Order establishing the Agency for Seizure of Terrorist Assets—ASTA. Our mission is to punish people who support terrorism by seizing their assets. The usual way is through DOJ and the courts. Takes forever, costs a fortune. Then you're lucky if the assets haven't been stripped. We don't wait. ASTA takes money directly from bank accounts. That's why we're based outside the States, in

Montreal. US laws don't apply.”

“You're stealing from people who finance terrorists?”

“Well, obviously they're not going to pay willingly.”

“Isn't that illegal, even in Canada?”

“When have we ever worried about what Canada thinks?”

Mac shrugged.

“Our targets use numbered accounts and Islamic banking. We're authorized by the President to take up to twice what we can prove they've contributed to terrorist activity. We transfer it from their accounts to ours.”

“Like a tax collector.”

Wisebaum nodded. “You got it. There are three hundred fifty-seven targets on our hit list. Many of the names were on a hard drive in Bin Laden's house in Abbottabad. But there's still a lot of work to find their bank accounts and steal their funds. Since we began earlier this year, we've already recovered more than \$150 mill. from just six targets.”

“And how did you get involved?”

“I was brought over from CIA. Made me an offer I couldn't refuse. We'd been developing software for some years designed to breach firewalls and exploit network vulnerabilities. We mixed it with some code from an older program called PROMIS. We call our suite of applications TRAKCEPT, for track and intercept.”

Mac decided that since he hadn't a clue what question to ask after this technobabble, he'd be better off changing the subject. “So I'm a contractor, not an employee.”

“Deniability, Mac. What we're doing isn't strictly by the books, as you can see. You do something to embarrass the US Government and you're on your own. But you'll see on page eighteen that the salary and bonus arrangements are very attractive. Note the twenty thousand sign-on perk. That should help ease the pain. *And*, you'll be relieved to know that we don't want you to kill anyone. Just help us get evidence on designated targets. Tomorrow there's an operation here in Nice I need you for. Next operation, I'll be partnering you up with one of the other team members.”

Mac didn't speak for a moment, as if weighing his options. But truth be told, there wasn't much wriggle room here. Not if he wanted to stay out of jail.

“And I can take time between operations? Do my own thing?”

Wisebaum's forehead creased slightly. "That's the benefit of being a contractor. But you must be available when I need you."

Mac nodded as he scribbled his signature and recorded his bank account details.

"Look, Mac, I'm only going to tell you this once. Don't mix up your work for ASTA with anything else you might decide to do. Know what I mean? Do that, and you're back where you started. Understand?"

"Noted. So who's my first target?"

Wisebaum adjusted his glasses and sipped his coffee as he waited for the laptop to boot up. He opened a folder full of photos and began a slideshow.

"This is Bogdan Brazhlov. A Chechen Muslim. The number-one importer of cocaine and heroin into Russia. Has links with the Triads in Hong Kong and even the Italian Mafia. Heavily involved in prostitution and extortion in London and on the French Riviera. His father was a general who was killed in Afghanistan back when we were funding the insurgency in Charlie Wilson's war. Brazhlov blames America, so he's backing the Taliban to avenge his father's death. The suicide bombs and roadside IEDs are mostly funded by Brazhlov. The Taliban sells him heroin in return. He's booked into the Chanticle Hotel next door for a week from tomorrow."

"So what are my rules of engagement?"

"Rules of...? Let me be clear about one thing, Mac—I don't want you playing soldier. Your job is helping *my team* take down Brazhlov. You'll meet them tonight. But remember, I'm running this show, not you. Understood?" Wisebaum reached out to shake.

"Sure."

He smiled and shook the hand proffered. But it seemed to Mac like a bullshit gesture. He had always been a team player. But Wisebaum didn't even want him on his team, and being a team player for almost seventeen years in the Army had gotten him where he was today. It was about time he looked after his own interests for a change. After being dumped in the shit by the shiny-asses at the Pentagon, it seemed entirely fair that he use the substantial resources of the US Government to achieve what *he* wanted.

So for now he'd play along. At least ASTA would give him funds and the flexibility to allow him to continue the search for Sophia and Danni.

14

Khalid, under guidance from the first officer of the *Princess Aliya*, Captain Jergah, steered the submarine away from the megayacht and tilted the joystick forward to take the craft down. The cabin was constructed of clear acrylic Plexiglas so passengers could see everything underwater, and as they cruised out to the headland, a shimmering curtain of sun's rays pierced the crystal water, unveiling a magnificent forest of giant kelp that swayed rhythmically with the ebb and flow of the waves.

Despite the tablets he had taken to calm himself, Khalid was finding it difficult to appreciate the beauty of the undersea forest as he concentrated on maneuvering the craft. He remembered only too well what it was like to drown. The pulse pounded in his neck and surged hot inside his skull as his mind went back to when he was strapped to a table and American interrogators poured water on the towel covering his face. Choking, gasping for air, the trickles of water catching in the back of his throat and panic before they took away the towel. Then they started all over again. Unimaginable terror—except for him it had been real.

Using a technique Sheriti had shown him, he took shallow breaths. It helped, but not much. After ten minutes, he turned the sub towards the precipitous cliffs of the half crater that rose almost vertically out of the water for a thousand feet. Brightly colored reef fish darted into shadows of coral as they passed, and a pod of spinner dolphins meandered by closely, as if curious at the alien vessel.

“Almost there. I will take over now if you wish, Highness” Captain Jergah suggested.

Khalid nodded, and Jergah lurched the submarine down and switched on the two powerful spotlights to light a wide arc ahead. Just before a rocky wall, the sub turned sharply left. They were in the tunnel. Khalid gasped as the craft bumped against the side, showering pebbles and sand in a soupy mix that cut visibility to a few feet. Past the bend, the force of the ocean eased. A sheer rock wall loomed in front of them.

“We've reached the staging area,” Fanning explained, as Captain Jergah pushed two small levers. Two metal arms shot out and slotted into holes in the wall. The submarine shuddered and stopped. “The submarine is now secured by powerful electro-magnets. Now watch the camera at the stern.”

As they watched, a gigantic metal grate shot up from the floor, ramming against the ceiling of the tunnel, blocking escape and preventing anyone following from gaining access to the staging area.

“Once the sub has anchored to the wall, this grate shuts before the entry hatchway will open,” Fanning said. “Upon leaving the fortress, it opens only after the hatchway has fully closed.”

“Just get us in the fortress,” Khalid said, fighting the discomfort threatening to overwhelm him.

Jergah pushed a third lever and pointed to the ceiling above where the hatchway began to roll back. When it was fully open, pumps blasted water out the ballast tanks and the sub rose to the surface.

Finally, inside! Khalid climbed out quickly, hungrily sucking in the thick air. Basalt pillars the height of a ten-story building reared up behind the dock, towering over piles of rubble from the excavations. Two guards greeted him as they maneuvered a small crane beside the dock to unload a crate of equipment the sub had carried.

Fanning continued his commentary. “Apart from the security tunnel to the resort, we have blocked off all external access points, other than the ventilation shaft and power and gas lines, which are well-hidden. Being concrete, the buildings will last for centuries. There’s sufficient gas for twelve months’ emergency power, and food and water for twelve months’ occupation by up to thirty people. Even so, we’re only using ten percent of the cavern, it’s really a giant lava tube.”

“You must know the cavern intimately, Bill,” Khalid said in a lighthearted voice.

“Every inch, I’d say.” Fanning laughed and walked on ahead.

Khalid exchanged a knowing glance with Ziad. *That is the problem, Bill. You know too much.*

After checking Khalid’s luxurious quarters, which had full internet communications, they came to the cellblock. Inside were five cells, each with three double bunk beds. Khalid went into the first cell and ran the cold water tap, splashing his face.

“Consistent with the specs in your design,” said Fanning, “the cells have been designed for ease of cleaning and for calming those who may have anxiety after being confined in the fortress for long periods. We designed the colored tiles to stimulate the brain and be more restful

than plain white would have been.”

“Very nice, Bill. Quite relaxing patterns.” *And one day soon, you and your family will be able to enjoy them.*

Beyond the cells was another operating theater to supplement the two above ground. Dr. Xi had suggested they construct this in case they needed to harvest organs in secret, while the resort above continued to operate as a legitimate facility. The rich—movie stars, celebrities, politicians—would pay millions to come to this beautiful place for their organ transplants, most not aware that their new healthy, compatible organ had just been removed from a living donor.

“Very good. Now the vault.”

“The vault extends ninety feet into the rock,” Fanning said. “Enough room to store four containers of cargo.”

“You’ve done your job well, Bill.”

“And you can rely on me to ensure it remains a closely guarded secret.”

Khalid nodded. “Of course, Bill. That is the key to your continued work with us. Now let us return. Through the tunnel to the resort this time. The inspection is deemed satisfactory. The handover is approved. As is your four million dollar bonus.” Grinning, he held Fanning’s hand as they walked.

Bill Fanning was indeed an outstanding engineer. But Khalid had no intention of paying a bonus.

15

Kalyptos, situated on a narrow cobbled street one back from the Nice wharves, seemed as authentic as any Greek restaurant Mac had been to. Whitewashed brick walls adorned with paintings of semi-naked nymphs cavorting with centaurs. Three musicians with stoic grins sitting on round stools, playing Greek classics. Faded blue-and-white checked tablecloths. No doubt later they would be smashing plates and dancing the Zorba as the ouzo took effect.

Mac had entered less than a minute after the others. Only one couple stood between him and the team, but they still hadn't noticed him. Amateurs.

He was trained in making quick assessments of individuals, and he studied Wisebaum's three companions. One of them would be his partner on their next operation. He needed to make sure it was the right one. One guy was a short, Italian-type, chain-smoker, looked intense, while the other also had latin features and wore a ring on his right hand. He moved his shoulders and was expressive with his hands, rather feminine mannerisms. The woman looked like a country girl living in the city, judging by her engaging smile, casual manner and tight jeans. She moved with the grace of a gazelle. Prey, not predator. Easy on the eye, but that was more a disadvantage in the field, where it was important not to stand out. She should be back in the office. She and Wisebaum were engrossed in a flirty conversation, and he wondered if they were in a relationship. Mac figured he'd go with the effeminate guy, if the choice was left to him. He'd fit in well in the Middle East, where men were used to holding hands and other physical contact that was anathema to many western males.

"I see those Rambo types all the time at the gym, strutting about, checking out their abs in the mirror, a hero in their own minds. Big insecurities, little dicks." The woman held up two fingers and pulled a face.

Wisebaum gave a meaty laugh and touched her arm a little too long. Either they were an item, or he'd like them to be. The woman hadn't responded in kind, so she was either naïve or just using him to get ahead.

Mac suddenly realized she must have been referring to him. She apparently knew he was a soldier, which she shouldn't, and it appeared she didn't want to work with him. Fine. The feeling was mutual. He had no desire to hold the hand of a pretty computer nerd from head

office. She'd attract all sorts of problems.

He needed to knock this on the head, and fast.

"*Bonsoir, mademoiselle et messieurs.* This way please," said the portly maître d', directing the group towards an empty table near the window.

Mac stepped out of the queue. "I'm with them."

Wisebaum spun around. "Mac! Where did you come from?"

"I was invited...I think? Could we have the table over there?" he asked, pointing to the back corner. It offered more protection from the street, a good view of the whole restaurant, and a quick exit through the kitchen.

The maître d' stiffened. "It's a little noisy, *monsieur.*"

"We love balalaika music."

"Bouzouki," the woman said. "Balalaikas are Russian."

"Correct, *mademoiselle.*" The maître d' bowed. He took them to their table and handed them menus.

Mac gave the woman a friendly smile. "I'm Rambo."

Wisebaum blustered, trying to regain control. "Lee McCloud, this is Tally Francis. Rosco Estuarez, Tony Cabrera. As I mentioned to you, Mac, you'll be partnered with Tally on the next project, after we've completed the current job."

"Actually, Derek, you said I'd be partnered with one of the team. You didn't say it'd be the April cover of Sports Illustrated."

Tony and Rosco looked horrified and glanced at Tally, waiting for her response. Wisebaum had his gaze firmly focused on the menu.

Christ, they're scared of her.

She pursed her lips and considered him for a moment, then said, "Actually, I'd have pegged you more as the Soldier of Fortune reader. Or maybe you just like the pictures of big guns." She smiled and sat down. "Well, I suppose at least you have a sense of humor."

He leaned across the table and whispered, "Helps, when you have to kill for a living."

"Have to? Or choose to?"

The other guys on the team were glancing at each other, looking somewhat uncomfortable and uncertain whether to intervene. A bubbly, ginger-haired waitress with piercings in her upper lip and eyebrow arrived and softened the icy glares across the table by

taking their orders, returning with Mythos beers for Mac and Tony and a bottle of Kratistos red for the others.

“Were any of you aware of me tailing you?” Mac said.

“Huh?” said Tony.

“You’re not in the office now. You never know where the threats might come from. For example, in a restaurant you should never sit by the window.”

“Kabul,” Tally said leaning back in her chair.

The others looked at her.

“You’ve been in Kabul too long, Rambo.”

“He’s got a point, Tal.” Wisebaum looked sheepish as he unfolded his napkin. “That’s why the director asked me to team you two together on the next operation.”

Mac felt a growing irritation. “Kandahar, actually.” Had they been told of his Special Ops background? That much, at least, should have been kept secret. “So, what have you guys been told about me?”

“Not enough for you to kill us, I hope.” Tally said, laughing with the others. She crossed her arms on the table and leaned towards him. “How’s this sound: Special Ops soldier screws up unauthorized stakeout in Mexico leaving two girls and four cops dead and two American girls missing without a trace. Some red-faced General in Washington needs to get rid of the problem and sends it to us. That about sum it up?”

“Tal...” Wisebaum, stroking his beard, shot her a disapproving frown.

Mac wasn’t going to be provoked, and he held his voice steady. “You’ve just demonstrated how a little knowledge can be dangerous.”

“And now he makes threats.” She finished her wine and heaved a sigh. “Listen, *Mac*, we’ve tried this before with a soldier. Doesn’t work. All you people know is how to kill.” She refilled her glass and took another mouthful.

The bouzoukis started again, slowly with a rhythmic, metallic twang.

The waitress returned with their orders. “*Bon appetit!*” she yelled above the noise. Her cheerful Irish-accented French ratcheted the tension back a notch.

“Mmm, this looks magnificent. Let’s not talk shop, eh?” Wisebaum had ordered the restaurant’s specialty dish, *astako makaronada*—lobster with macaroni—and he attacked its soft white flesh.

Tally persisted with her attack. “Are we supposed to ignore the elephant in the room, Derek? No offense, but just so we’re clear, I think the world would be better off with fewer soldiers and more teachers.”

Tony and Rosco were watching them like it was a boxing match and one of the contenders was about to get knocked out of the ring. Mac sliced his swordfish steak and tried to ignore her. She was quickly getting under his skin. Still, with his training, he knew he could get the better of her. She’d be the one to lose her temper first. And then he wouldn’t need to work with her.

“To the glory of war!” Tally held up her glass in a mock salute, and took another gulp.

Mac held his emotions and lifted his eyes to meet her gaze. “No soldier thinks there’s glory in war. What you armchair critics don’t understand is that war is never totally in control. It’s frequently unfair... But then, life’s not fair either, is it? How fair is it that innocent people get killed when a plane’s flown into the building they just happen to work in?”

Tally stopped eating and shot a look at Wisebaum. There was more than a hint of color in her face.

“Tally’s parents were killed in the North Tower on 9/11,” Wisebaum said quietly.

There was a few moments’ silence. Mac glanced at the others, could see that he’d maybe gone onto shaky ground. He hadn’t been briefed on these people, so how could he be expected to know? It still didn’t excuse her attitude about servicemen and women.

“Nice fish,” Tony mumbled.

Tally quickly recovered, pointed her knife at Mac. “You think we’ve beaten Al Qaeda? Afghanistan’s more dangerous than ever, even post Bin Laden. And I’m not an armchair critic. I know what the military does. It screwed up the soldier I went out with.”

Mac swallowed his mouthful of fish. “You sure it was the army that did that?”

Tally’s mouth dropped, and she uttered a spluttering cough. Her face and neck flushed and she glared at him like he was the guy who couldn’t find Obama’s birth certificate. For a moment, Mac thought she was going to storm out. Good. That would solve his problems.

Wisebaum almost choked. He pulled off his glasses. “Guys...”

But clearly Tally wasn’t about to let it go at that. She spoke softly, but with an aim as devastating as a sniper. “So, what’s the military done for you, Mac? Where are your friends? Has it helped you to buy a home? Has it helped you get a wife and family? Your file says your former

fiancée dumped you while you were serving with the Rangers. Ended up marrying your brother. That must have been tough. Then, of course, there's the Mexico fiasco. I guess we shouldn't be surprised you accepted Derek's deal to get you off the hook. Terribly sad about those two little Mexican girls who—"

"Enough!" Mac slammed his fist on the table.

Tally's glass tumbled off the table and shattered on the floor. Several customers turned towards the source of the commotion. The bouzoukis played louder. Rosco and Tony sat like frozen Arctic explorers.

"See how easily he loses it, Derek? I can't work with this guy." She stood up and walked out.

There was a moment's silence. Mac reached over and stabbed his fork into the carrots on her plate. "No point letting them go to waste."

16

Sophia was alone in the cell, haunted by Danni's screams. Bouts of trembling had exhausted her body, just as the gentle rocking of the boat served to disorient her. She pulled the sheet up over her head and squeezed her eyes shut, but the lights were bright and she couldn't shut out the horrifying thought that whatever Danni's fate had been, the same fate would soon be hers too.

Danni, where are you?

She tried to distract herself by thinking of things in her room back home: her favorite plush rabbit, Dodo, with some of the stuffing missing, but still taking pride of place on the top shelf; the gymnastic trophies from early high school, the photos of her friends stuck on the wall in a heart shape, the Jonas Brothers poster, the iPad from last birthday, the *I'm Not Dead* poster of Pink... She hoped her mother would interpret that as an omen and not tear it down.

How long had it been? Would they think she was dead? How long before they would give up on her? How long before dad drove her stuff to the Salvation Army? Wade would probably get her room and ruin it.

Stop it!

She burst into tears and buried her face in the pillow.

Danni, what did they do to you?

She had always thought of slavery as something they had done to black people hundreds of years ago. Yet, obviously these men were not ashamed to be buying and selling kids as though they were at a racehorse auction. Incredibly, she and Danni had resigned themselves to being sold. But at the end of the auction, they were still sitting on the beach with five other girls and three boys. The captives that had been sold had been taken into one of the other tents. Strangely, this made her feel even more worthless, if that were possible. Had they been considered undesirable? What was their fate to be?

Then they had come for Danni.

Danni had struggled and cried out in protest as they dragged her up the beach, staring back with eyes that seemed to plead: *Why me?* Sophia felt the full burden of guilt. Yet even then, she prayed they would not come for her.

But they had not taken Danni to the auction tent. They had taken her into another tent and

she could hear some kind of announcement. Then applause.

Then the screams began. Danni's screams. What were they doing to cause her such pain? She could only imagine the most horrifying acts of cruelty. They were torturing her, killing her slowly. The other girls, even two of the boys, were crying and trying to block the sound from their ears. Suddenly Danni's screams became too much. Sophia retched up the little food remaining in her stomach, then collapsed onto the sand.

Some time later, men had come for them and ferried them back to the compound where they were locked in their cabins. At some point she must have fallen asleep, because she was shaken awake by a woman she had seen before, who smelled strongly of a spicy, earthy sort of perfume. A guard stood by the door.

"You will come with me," the woman said firmly in English.

"No... Please," she whispered, her voice cracking from lack of water.

The woman grabbed her arm and she held onto the bed sheets, whimpering softly as she was dragged onto the floor. The guard came in and pried the sheet from her hand.

"Please don't hurt me... oh, God." Sophia felt the warmth wash over her legs.

The woman stepped back and pulled a face, then spoke abruptly to the guard, who left, grumbling.

"Come, Sophia. My name is Rubi. You will not be harmed."

Sophia did not believe this woman's promises. She was one of *them*.

Rubi led her along a jetty out to the big boat. There was a gentle breeze blowing, bringing with it a burble of talking and laughter. There was some kind of party on one of the decks above. With no moon, the blazing lights of the *Princess Aliya* cast a muted glow across to the cliffs a few hundred yards away. As they climbed the ship's external stairs, Sophia considered throwing herself over the side. But she was too scared to try, in case she succeeded.

The guard stayed outside as Rubi led her into a large cabin decorated in pastel colors, which she said was the women's quarters. She opened the door to a huge bathroom where a steaming bath was waiting.

"Clean yourself thoroughly. And wash your hair. His Highness Sheik Khalid wishes to see you."

17

Khalid, dressed casually in tan shorts and a white polo shirt, smiled at the girl called Sophia as she was brought in. Rubi straddled an ottoman across from both of them as he introduced himself in English and explained to her that he'd been educated at Oxford. He thought perhaps she'd be less afraid if she knew he was Western-educated. But her demeanor suggested that this wasn't the case. She was visibly shaking, suggesting that his gentle approach was scaring her more. The girl was pretty, that was certain. The cotton *abaya* she wore was thin, and he admired her willowy figure through the cloth.

“Are you cold, my dear?” he asked.

She shook her head, but said nothing.

He invited her to sit. She remained standing. Defiance? Perhaps it made her feel more in control? He tilted his head. “Very well, stand if you wish.”

He glanced at his watch. He had less than an hour before Sheriti would come, and he would need to save his energies for her. And tomorrow he was flying out to visit his father in Dubai. Perhaps when he returned, the girl would be more cooperative. It was vital that she be in the best possible physical and emotional state and her organs not stressed when his father arrived for the transplant in a week or two, when he was well enough.

“I have told Rubi to look after you as she would a sister,” he began. He looked over at Rubi, who nodded and gave the girl an affirming smile. “If you promise to behave and comply with orders, and not try to escape or harm yourself, you will be well cared for at the resort.”

“Like you took care of Danni?” Sophia said. “I can still hear her screaming.”

Rubi spoke quietly to him in Arabic. “Danni was the one used in the ritual.”

He nodded, keeping his expression friendly so as not to give away his feelings. “Your friend has a good pair of lungs,” he said in English, and smiled. “But she is somewhat stubborn. Defiant. That is unacceptable to many in our culture.”

Sophia frowned. “Where is she? What have you done with her?”

“She was purchased by one of my guests.” That was close to the truth. The girl had finally accepted conversion after almost an hour and, in accordance with the ritual, mercy had been shown. The Bangladeshi, Bashir Alsadh, had been willing to take her as a house slave.

“But the auction was over... They were making her scream.”

Khalid hesitated as he considered a plausible response, then gave a soft laugh. “The man who bought her is from Saudi Arabia. A Prince. He would not demean himself to bid at auction. Danni refused to dress in the traditional *burqa*, as he required. She struggled and kicked. She bit one of my men quite badly. And yes, she was beaten several times until she complied. She screamed.”

“She sounded like she was in pain.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps she was? I cannot say. As I said, she fought like a cornered cat. That was her choice, not ours. But she will be well treated in the Prince’s household.”

Sophia stared at him, her eyes narrowed, as though she didn’t believe his story. He kept his expression impassive. He knew from experience that his face was attractive to women, and this naïve girl would not see through the confidence of a powerful man.

“Your doctor. He...” She swallowed, hesitating to utter the words.

“Yes?”

“He... he forced himself on me.”

“What?” he said, turning to Rubi who was shaking her head, apparently unaware of this. He rose to his feet, quick to sense anger. “You are no longer a virgin?”

She hesitated, now clearly petrified at the consequences of her answer, and pulled a face. “No... Yes. He... did it in my mouth.”

Khalid’s shoulders relaxed. He sat down again and laughed, waving his hand dismissively. “Come now, girl, you have never done that before?” He shrugged. “Well, you have teeth, do you not?”

She lowered her head and said nothing.

“Very well.” Khalid turned to Rubi and pointed at Sophia’s robe. Switching back to Arabic, he said: “Take her to the market in Kimba before she further inflames the desires of the crew. She must remain under close guard here until we return. Buy her some clothes and whatever she wishes, and put her in the secure wing of the resort. We’ll be back in a few days after visiting father. Then I will take another look at her.”

He turned to the girl. “Rubi will take you shopping for some nice clothes. Would that make you feel better, Sophia?”

“Can I call my mom and tell her I’m alive, at least?”

He almost laughed, but then decided to play along. It might make her more amenable later. “Well, how about this... You can make a video recording, and I will make sure it is delivered to her. But no saying where you are or who you are with, are we clear?”

The girl’s mouth turned up a little tentatively at the corners. “Thank you.”

Khalid smiled. “You will refer to me as Highness.”

Sophia hesitated, her lips pressed together, then muttered, “Thank you, Highness.”

18

Anastia Slabekova lay on a grimy rooftop in Sofia, Bulgaria, eight hundred yards from where her target was due to show. She was dressed in black leather and concealed inside a specially constructed canvas hide with an opening at the front. Her weapon was a Russian VSS silenced sniper rifle. This particular rifle had once been used by a Russian Army sniper in Chechnya, but she'd replaced the weapon's original PSO 1-1 sight with a Zeiss Diavari telescopic sight. She would see the target's head clearly as she blew a hole in it. It had a ten-round clip. She had loaded three but was intending to fire only one.

Her partner, Anton Nastayev, hadn't warned her of any threats. His soft breathing sounded sexy through the Bluetooth headset. He was on the roof of a building that was closer to the target, but at a thirty-degree angle to hers, which would confuse witnesses as to the location of the shooter.

Her target was Viktor Rusolev, a notorious criminal who owned a chain of supermarkets and a number of flashy nightclubs that fronted for prostitution and drug distribution. He'd been implicated in an organized operation that was kidnapping girls and sending them to France, Britain and Germany as sex slaves. Previous attempts by the police to bring him into line had failed, and after the Interior Minister was recently blown up in a car with his wife and daughter, the Bulgarian Cabinet decided to authorize SANS, the State Agency for National Security, to eliminate the problem. And she and Anton were SANS' contractors of choice, even if they were more expensive than their competitors. They had nineteen previous successes under their belt, as the newly democratic Bulgaria used them to clean out the stubborn elements of the corrupt post-Communist oligarchy.

Anton had discovered that Rusolev would be coming to his favorite club—one that he owned, of course—to meet a man known as The Frenchman. They knew that The Frenchman was already inside. Finally, after four hours of trying to keep warm, Anton's calm voice spoke through her earpiece.

“This looks like him. Good luck, my darling.”

She didn't need to reply.

A convoy of six black vehicles drove up fast. Bodyguards stepped out of the first two

cars and the last two. Anastia saw a small movement from the gunman with a rifle on the roof of the nightclub. He'd been placed there to protect Rusolev and they could do nothing about him—that's why she needed to succeed with one bullet. Between Rusolev getting out of the vehicle and entering the building, she'd have about eight seconds.

Two cars hadn't opened their doors. Rusolev could be in either one. She shifted her aim to the rear door of one, then the other, knowing the bodyguards could not spot her inside the black hide. After studying the surroundings, the bodyguards gave the thumbs-up. One of them opened the rear door of the third vehicle. Three women appeared, under the influence of something, judging by the way they staggered up the steps. A man emerged with a woman on each arm. Ten seconds. The man had wavy black hair and was the right height.

Anastia eased pressure on the trigger. Something was wrong. It was the man's walk. Not the confident swagger she was expecting. His eyes were darting around. A car horn sounded from the street below. The man glanced in her direction, revealing his face for just a moment in her crosshairs. It wasn't Rusolev.

The decoy went into the club as the rear door of the fourth limousine opened. Two mountainous bodyguards emerged, followed by two women who were glammed-up like the others, but were walking sober. A third man, his head hidden under a fedora, emerged with a fourth man and woman in tow. Eight seconds. Two possible targets. Moving fast. Six seconds. The car horn sounded again. One of the men looked, the other with the fedora kept walking. Just before he entered the building he turned and raised his head slightly to speak to a tall bodyguard. They were his last words.

She squeezed the trigger smoothly. The nine-millimeter bullet was heavier than normal and the hardened tungsten core could penetrate body armor. It travelled at subsonic speed but carried considerable more impact energy than lighter, faster rounds. It entered Rusolev's forehead above his left eyebrow. There was no sound of a gunshot. Just his head exploding. Blood and brain matter splattered everyone nearby. All hell broke loose. Wild gunfire opened up from outside the club and from the gunman on the roof.

Anastia pulled herself back out of the hide, hearing the muffled pops of Anton firing to cover her escape. She allowed herself a few deep breaths as she unscrewed the telescopic sight, leaving the rifle and the hide. She took off the medical gloves and scurried, bent double, to the stairwell. She knew that after emptying his clip, Anton would dump his rifle in the water tank

and be out of the building well before the police arrived.

“Nice shot, darling,” Anton said to her a few minutes later, as she drove them to the airport. “How did you know?”

“His fedora. But your little trick with the remote car horn sealed it. The other guy looked. Rusolev didn’t.”

They laughed. It was a ruse they’d used before, to good effect.

Anton checked the messages on his cell phone. “It would appear that Yuri has brokered us another contract. Urgent. But paying top dollar, my love.”

Anastia glanced at him and smiled. “No women or children?”

“Of course not, darling. Just some old Arab Prince.”

19

At an internet café in Nice, two blocks from the Chanticle Hotel where Boris Brazhlov was staying, Tally was passing herself off as a backpacker, wearing tight yellow shorts that showed she exercised regularly, and a too-snug white cotton T-shirt that rubbed her nipples hard. Her hair was frizzed with her natural wave. Over her shoulder was a North Face daypack that had seen good mileage on past bush hikes.

She had checked out the computers in this particular internet café a few days earlier. They were fast enough and could be secured. Importantly, it used the same telephone exchange as the Chanticle Hotel, so they would be able to make it appear as though Bogdan Brazhlov was transferring his funds using the hotel's internet. And there was no CCTV.

Rosco had arrived shortly after she'd sat down. He'd purchased some computer time and sat directly behind her to watch for any busybodies. There were only six others in the café and their heads were buried in their computers.

At her computer, Tally ran through a number of checks. First, she checked that there was no hardware attached that shouldn't be. Next she inserted a USB stick and installed several small apps. One of these checked for viruses, and another ensured there was no keylogger program. A third loaded an ASTA remote communications application. She rebooted. Now she could log onto the ASTA network using the café's broadband connection without being monitored.

Tally took a breath and glanced around her, rubbing her cracked rib where Austin's punches lingered. Rosco gave her an inconspicuous signal that all was clear.

With the computer now a remote desktop linked to the ASTA servers in Montreal, Tally typed furiously. The Nice Telephone Exchange had an automated main distribution frame, which meant that she would be able to rearrange the switching of lines simply by hacking into the switching server. Using the TRAKCEPT application, Tally mapped the route connecting the host switch, the internet café and the Chanticle Hotel, then overrode the remote switch and configured the switching server so that the two locations appeared to be on the same concentrator. This small configuration change would make it appear, if anyone checked, that the person logging into Brazhlov's bank accounts had done so from the hotel.

As she waited for Tony to call back, she wondered whether Mac would still be working

with them after this operation. She felt a twinge of guilt for raising the ghosts of Mac's past the way she had. Probably shouldn't have said those personal things. She wasn't normally that bitchy, but she'd been desperate not to have to work with him. Derek had told her later that she'd taken it too far, even as he laughed about how Mac had calmly eaten her carrots after she'd walked out. Actually, she decided, Mac had handled himself quite well in the circumstances. He'd displayed some emotion when she'd prodded him hard enough. But he wasn't an Austin. Maybe she could work with him.

If they did end up working together, she'd need to be careful how she handled him, given his potential for impulsive behavior and his disastrous track record with women. According to his file, he'd had three serious relationships in the ten years since Susan, but mostly tended to have short-term, superficial ones. She wasn't surprised that he didn't trust women. She supposed the nature of his army life wouldn't have been conducive to a stable relationship. Still, that was some chip he had on his shoulder.

She could understand how women might be attracted to the vulnerability behind those dark eyes, despite the tough face and the hard hands, but she wasn't one who'd be distracted by that. She liked men who could have a conversation and laugh with her. To her, it was men's intellect more than their bodies that appealed. Well, as a general rule, anyway.

Her cell phone rang. It wasn't Tony. It was her sister, Benita. *Not a good time, Sis.* Then she scolded herself. Lately, it never seemed to be a good time. Ben had never recovered from their parents' death. Collateral traumatic stress, her doctor called it. She called it another life destroyed. She took the call.

"Hi, Ben," she said in her chirpiest voice.

"It's been three days. I've been worried," the shaky voice on the other end of the line complained.

"Sorry, I meant to call yesterday, but I was traveling. How was the concert?" She'd purchased the two tickets to encourage Ben to go out with a friend.

Benita gave a big sigh. "Oh, I wasn't feeling the best, and I couldn't find anyone to go with. And it was raining and..." Her voice drifted off.

"Ben—"

"Don't get mad, Tal." Benita's voice raised its volume. "That's not what I need right now... Anyway, you know I hate crowds. I'll pay back the money for the tickets, okay?"

Tally was about to say something when her cell phone buzzed to show another caller.

“Gotta go, Ben. I’ll call you later. Promise.”

She pressed the button to answer Tony’s call and terminate Ben’s.

20

Mac and Tony were in a room on the second floor of the Chanticle Hotel wearing overalls and yellow fluorescent vests, with fake nametags dangling from their necks. By the door were two equipment bags. Maintenance workers' gear that would allow them to enter Brazhlov's suite without raising suspicion. They were waiting for Brazhlov and his bodyguards to leave.

Yesterday, Tony had installed a tiny wireless videocam beside the fire switch in the hall across from Brazhlov's suite, so they could observe their comings and goings. There had certainly been more comings than goings, with a parade of beautiful women at intervals late last night and early this morning. Brazhlov had taken breakfast as room service.

"The man's a machine," Tony said, as three women hobbled out of the suite looking exhausted.

Somehow that comment reminded Mac of the last time he'd had sex, around three months ago, in an Abrams tank at Fort Bragg. One of those bucket-list things. Most uncomfortable place he'd ever done it. Thankfully, Carole, a medic from the 44th, had taken gymnastics as a kid and still had the flexibility.

"Even machines need to be refueled," he said, pacing the room. "Maybe they'll run out of the white powder and do lunch."

Sure enough, shortly after midday, Brazhlov and his boys appeared on their monitor and got into the elevator. A few minutes later, out the window, Mac could see them walking along the pebble beach.

Tony plugged in his Bluetooth headset and called Tally. "Brazhlov's gone out." After a pause, he turned to Mac. "Tally's in the internet café now. Let's go."

As Tony had explained it, eight weeks earlier Rosco had managed to embed a keylogger onto Brazhlov's notebook computer using a Trojan virus in an innocent-looking email. When Brazhlov had accessed his online banking, the keylogger had recorded his account numbers and passwords. He had at least twelve numbered accounts in tax havens. But there remained a problem. They'd discovered that his accounts had the additional security of a *token tag*. This bank-issued electronic device generated a six-digit "token" or PIN number that had to be entered, in addition to the password, each time the account was accessed. They needed the token tags for

a few minutes so they could log into Brazhlov's accounts.

Tony and Mac had been given the task of raiding Brazhlov's hotel room safe in the hope the tags would be locked in there. It would be safer for Brazhlov to leave them than to carry them on him to the places he frequented. As the newbie, Mac knew that his every action would be under scrutiny by Derek—and especially by Tally.

When there was no answer from room 402 to his knocking, Tony used a metal card attached to an electronic device to gain entry. Inside, the suite had been trashed. Empty champagne bottles were scattered like dead soldiers among food wrappers, broken glasses and leftover food. Six trolleys with demolished meals had been shoved together in the center of the living room. Bedsheets, towels, clothing, and several condom wrappers littered the furniture. One used condom was stuck to a curtain.

"Filthy pigs," Tony said, tiptoeing around the mess.

Mac took a wrench out of his bag and went into the bathroom where he loosened the stop valve on the toilet just enough for water to start dripping onto the floor. Came back and stood by the door. "I'll keep watch. You can bet they've told housekeeping to clean up while they're out," he said, glancing through the door's security viewer.

Tony went into the bedroom and opened the cupboard containing the room safe. He held a small rectangular device against it, and after a few seconds Mac heard the distinctive whirring noise as the safe opened.

Tony called Tally again. "I'm in, Tal," he said, wiping his sweaty forehead as he spoke into his headset. "There's a laptop computer, a bundle of euros, a baggy of coke, an envelope... Gotcha!" He grabbed the wire loop holding the token tags and pulled it out. It caught on the safe door and came apart, scattering about a dozen token tags across the floor like plastic cockroaches.

"Holy shit!" said Tony, scrambling to collect the devices among the garbage on the floor. "I've dropped them..." he explained to Tally.

"Just take it easy," Mac said. "Do you know how many there were?" He picked up three tags and passed them to Tony before resuming his position at the door.

"I think that's all of them. Okay. Okay. Which bank do you want first?" Tony asked Tally as he threaded the tags back onto the wire.

A pause.

“Okay.” Tony had the tag she wanted. “Got it.” He pressed the button on the device. “The token is six, three, five, seven, two, six.”

At that moment, Mac saw the elevator door open and a trolley appear. “Fuck! The cleaners! Close up!”

He quickly pulled a wrench from his tool bag. Then he spotted a loose token tag beside the wheel of one of the trolleys.

No time.

“Housekeeping,” a woman’s voice called as she knocked.

After a moment the door bumped against his back.

“*Un moment, s’il vous plaît,*” Mac yelled.

Tony placed the wire loop with the tokens back inside the safe and closed up. Mac stood back from the door. Two dark-skinned women pushed it open and stood on each side of the cleaners’ trolley.

“*Qui êtes-vous? Que faites-vous ici?*” demanded one of the women, who was holding fresh towels. Her eyes drifted past Mac into the room. “*Oooh! Mon Dieu! Misha!*”

The other woman peered into the room with a horrified look. She didn’t make a move to enter.

Mac pointed towards the bathroom, then pinched his nose. “*La toilette est bloquée. Merde! Revenez plus tard.*”

The woman spoke vigorously to her colleague and waved her free arm. She dumped the clean towels in his arms and they scurried away, pushing their trolley towards the elevator.

“They’ve gone.” He put the bottle down and picked up the loose token. “The Mediterranean Commerce Bank of Cyprus.”

“Fuck! Fuck!” Tony was freaking out. “I’ve got to put that back!”

Mac heard the *ding* of the elevator. “Wait.” He checked the security viewer. “Oh, shit. They’re back! Get in the bathroom. Quickly!” He handed Tony the wrench.

Moments later the door was flung open and one of Brazhlov’s hefty bodyguards stepped into the room. He reached his hand in his jacket, but didn’t pull out the weapon that was obviously there. The man glared at him and yelled a string of foreign words that sounded like they were probably expletives.

Thank God for the fluoro jacket, Mac thought.

He shrugged. "*Entretien. La toilette.*" Mac pointed to his bag of tools and waved his finger lazily towards the bathroom.

The man pushed him into the bathroom, where Tony was kneeled at the toilet with the wrench.

"Stay! You stay here!" the man yelled in English. He hurried back into the bedroom and after a moment Mac heard the whirring noise of the safe being opened. Would the guy count the token tags and find one was missing?

"Finished," Tony said.

"Let's go."

Mac led Tony out into the living room and gave a lazy salute to the bodyguard, who was walking out of the bedroom.

"Okay," said Mac.

The man said something that again Mac and Tony didn't understand. Then he said in a gruff voice: "Clean! Clean!" and waved his hand around the room.

"Lady clean!" Mac yelled back and shook his head. Looked at his watch. "Lady clean!" He held up five fingers. "Five minutes!"

The bodyguard nodded and looked relieved. Waved them out.

"*Merci, Monsieur.*" Mac lingered by the door, palm out meaningfully.

The bodyguard pulled a face and tossed him a two-euro coin.

As they hurried to the elevator, Tony said, "We're screwed if Brazhlov notices one of his tags missing."

21

Tally's excitement mounted. At the Royal & International Bank of Seychelles *Log In* prompt, she typed the number of Brazhlov's account and password that she knew from memory. A soft 'beep' sounded and another popup screen appeared.

"Give me the token, Tony."

She typed the token as he read it out, then hit Enter. The screen went blank while the bank's security authentication protocol processed the data. After a moment, a list of accounts appeared.

"I'm in!" she whispered, but Tony had disconnected.

In Brazhlov's account were six sub-accounts, all with amounts in US dollars. The amounts ranged from \$420,000 to \$320 million. Brazhlov had named each account after a bird: there was a Falcon Account, Eagle Account, Hawk Account, and so on. Tally memorized these in case she could gain access again later.

She called Tony back and got voicemail. What had happened? She started to feel guilty that she'd been hoping Mac would screw things up. Now her concern was that without more tokens she wouldn't be able to access any of Brazhlov's other accounts. If that was the case, she would need to recover as much as she could from the accounts now showing on her screen.

So be it.

She went through each sub-account, checking the last four month's transactions. The largest transfer was from the Eagle Account, for \$41 million. She mentally crossed her fingers as she typed in a transfer of \$40 million to the numbered account ASTA had opened at the Standard Global Bank of the Cook Islands. She held her breath. Waited. After a moment, the confirmation screen appeared, signaling the funds had been transferred.

One down, five to go!

She released her breath and sneaked a covert grin at Rosco, who winked in return. She moved the cursor to the Hawk account, which had a \$243 million balance, with the highest transfer being \$15 million. As she attempted to transfer \$14 million, a message in bold appeared: *Maximum transfer permitted on this account: \$10 million.* Brazhlov must have changed the daily transfer limit. She transferred nine million and moved to the next account. After a few minutes,

she'd transferred \$87 million to the Cook Islands Account.

She dialed Tony again, but again it went to voicemail. She dialed Mac's number. He answered on the second ring.

"What happened? I can't get Tony."

"He's down in the basement bringing up the rental. We're checking out. One of Brazhlov's men came back to see if the room was being cleaned. Good news. I have another token tag. The Mediterranean Commerce Bank of Cyprus. Care to try that?"

A few minutes later, Tally had recovered a further \$64 million. She was shaking. She wanted to run from the internet café before the police stormed in and arrested her. At the same time, she could scarcely restrain herself from squealing with delight. She pressed speed dial. After a moment a voice came on the line.

"Wisebaum."

"One hundred fifty big ones, Derek!" she whispered.

"Great job, Tal. Now clean up and walk out nice and slow. We'll talk later." He disconnected.

She deleted her applications, cookies, history, and residual files, then reconfigured the switching server at the Nice Exchange. She rebooted the computer. Taking out a small perfume spray bottle, she sprayed the keyboard, desk and mouse. The alkaline mixture would destroy any fingerprints.

"Let's hope Brazhlov doesn't want to check his balance tonight," Rosco said to her as they arrived back at the Negresco Hotel to meet the others, before departing for the airport.

Clearance of the funds would occur in two to three days. After that, the funds would be electronically shifted among hundreds of accounts at various banks in Liechtenstein, Turks and Caicos, Panama, Cyprus, Cayman Islands, Bermuda, and Antigua and Barbuda. They would be then consolidated in three Monaco banks before being shifted to various ASTA accounts around the world. The Cook Islands account would then be closed. Within five days, there would be no trace of the funds' final destination.

They just had to wait.

At his suite in the acute care wing of the Pierre Morrell Cancer Clinic in Dubai, Prince Abu-Bakr Yubani smiled weakly, beckoning Khalid closer until the cracked lips almost touched his ear. His father's foul breath had a metallic edge, and the old man struggled for air before gaining sufficient strength to speak. The words came out in a hoarse whisper, interspersed with shallow, weak coughs. "Our fortress?"

"Finished. It's magnificent, father. I pray you'll soon be well enough to fly to Andaran and see it. Everything is ready. We finally have a donor girl with excellent compatibility, and Dr. Xi's team has practiced the operation on four other patients. When will the doctors say we can move you?"

His mother, Princess Aliya, stopped talking quietly with Rubi and came over to adjust Abu-Bakr's pillows. "The doctors say he'll be released in about two weeks. He just needs a little more rest after the pneumonia."

"It is in Allah's hands," Abu-Bakr said. "Is the fortress completely secure?"

It will be, once Fanning and his wife are eliminated, Khalid thought. But he knew better than to worry his ailing father about that.

"It's totally secure, father. Tell me about these threats Ibrahim mentioned?"

Abu-Bakr put his finger to his lips before whispering the words, "Jing-Ho." He grimaced as he tried to shift his body to a different position.

"The old man who looks after your villa in Paris? Surely he is not threatening you?"

Abu-Bakr shook his head and gestured to Princess Aliya, who took an envelope from her handbag and handed it to Khalid.

"Just before he was admitted to this place he wrote things down," Princess Aliya said. "The rest you'll get from Ibrahim and your father's attorney."

Khalid felt a weariness wash over him. He wanted to be gone from this morbid place. "I'll go then, mother. I have business at home."

"Ibrahim..." Abu-Bakr croaked, pointing to the door.

Khalid called Ibrahim into the room.

"Ibrahim, you must retrieve the cargo..." said Abu-Bakr, grabbing the oxygen mask and

taking a few breaths. "...and move it to the fortress."

Ibrahim nodded. "I will ensure it is moved to safety, Highness."

Abu-Bakr gasped and grabbed Khalid's arm, the urgency insistent. "Son, you... cannot go with Ibrahim...Cargo is buried... Saudi desert. Be careful, my son. They..." He lay back and closed his eyes.

"What? What?" Khalid asked, leaning closer, but his father had slipped out of consciousness. Khalid gagged at the putrid smell of cancer on his father's breath. He was relieved to be leaving.

"It is as well that you don't come tomorrow," Princess Aliya said. "Your brothers and his other wives are coming for a visit. He'll be fine. We will see you on Andaran in two weeks."

Khalid gave his mother an affectionate hug. As he and Rubi walked out with their bodyguards, he took one last glance and thought about the girl, Sophia. Soon her lungs would be inside his father, and he would have a new lease on life.

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