

**DICK
HOUNDS THE
AFGHANS**

A DICK AVERY ADVENTURE STORY

CHAPTER 1

SUCKED DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

I was a Dick—truly. My name was Avery M. Dick III and I came from a long line of unremarkable Dicks. My parents were proud of the name and they should have been because they grew up when Dicks were respectable—Dick Tracy, Dick Cheney, and, of course, Dick Nixon. It was a wholly innocent time for Dicks. However, I wasn't so pleased with the name since it caused me torment and teasing since I was a kid. It still smarted now that I was all grown up and sort of mature. It was also life's not-so-little irony that I became a Special Agent with the U.S. Department of State's, Diplomatic Security Service. And I was a bona fide Dick in most other respects too.

Yes, I knew—a Dick was a Dick was a Dick. Excuse

me Gertrude for mangling your famous line, but that was the long and the short of it and I made no apology for the weak pun. That was because it had been the story of my life—one unending pun. It was all the more funny now that I was returning to work after being retired for the past 8 years. I'd been growing old and going crazy, not to put too dull a point on things. I had no money, pride, or regrets; at least until now. I'd been down on my luck and life for a long time. However, I was pleased to tell you that I had just turned the famous corner we'd all heard about. But I should've peeked first.

This was my first day back as a reemployed annuitant. That was government-speak for my new appointment to Diplomatic Security. However, *retread*, *geezer*, and *retard* were the appellations most often used in the biz for those who returned to feed at the organization's generous trough. *Mutant* was also a popular tag among the DS pundits. It wasn't an exact rhyme with *annuitant*, but near enough for government work as the bureaucrats liked to remind.

Keep in mind that horseshoes, inexactitude, and wordplay were serious pastimes in Washington. In the State Department, the ability to use malapropisms, double entendres, rhymes and puns was a prized trait where words—written words in particular—meant everything. Word usage was important because true actions and decisions sometimes had unintended consequences. And those could be career limiting and painful if you weren't careful.

Speaking of limitations, my appointment limited the amount of money I could earn, but that shouldn't be a problem. I didn't plan to spend any more time than absolutely necessary to get the job over with. I only

signed-on for a three month stint and I planned to stay that particular course. In any case, I had just returned to Washington to be briefed on my supposedly important overseas assignment. Yes, that was exactly how they described it—important. Perhaps in some sense that made me important too. Thank god they didn't use the word *plum* in describing my assignment and sketchy role in their little drama. That would have been terribly misleading and totally inaccurate. The pits maybe, but I never would have been that fruity. That image would have been wholly out of character in such a manly-man organization as DS.

I was here because DS was desperate. I was here because I was desperate—a good fit, all things considered. *Here*, by the way, was the Diplomatic Security Service headquarters in Arlington, Virginia and I was waiting in the building's lobby. I had an audience with Senior Special Agent Jersey Briggs, Director, Office of Investigations and Counterintelligence, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State. I'll leave out the *United States of America* part for the sake of brevity. Jersey was making me wait, as usual. It was probably another case of petty payback for past tiffs. He was my junior by a few years and now it was his turn to lord it over me. Okay, yes, I knew. "What goes around....."

The DS headquarters building was an unimposing brick and glass structure surrounded by like buildings in suburban Arlington. *Indistinguishable* was another descriptor. Truthfully, the words *bland*, *plain*, and *dull* also came to mind; much like the people hiding inside. The building's most remarkable feature was its unremarkable location, meaning it was situated well-

away from State's main flagpole. That meant the department's Black Dragons, by conscious design and discontent, made sure that DS would never again be quartered in the Main State building or Mother State for many of us. Please remember, I'd been away from her warm, embracing arms for awhile.

The perceptions of status and power were important commodities in Washington; almost as important as the real things. The Black Dragons were an institution within an institution. What was a Black Dragon? That was an all-powerful careerist in a key position in either the Civil Service or Foreign Service side of the house. They were creatures whose alliances and bonds were forged in shared experiences, exchanges of political favors, and fraternal handshakes. The Dragons, not the politicians, ran the department. They held sway over the whole machinery of the budgetary, personnel and foreign affairs processes. Their gnarled clutches embraced the institution's body-politic tightly against their scaly bosoms. And they didn't easily release their prey to others.

Here were some other descriptors of their scope of power. They were the puppet-masters of the government sideshow called the State Department. The term *old boy* didn't quite fully describe the clout and prestige they wielded within the institution. They were modern day Knights Templar without the pretense of religiosity, the truth told. They swore loyalty and fidelity only to each other and their common vision of what the Department of State was and would forever be. A large part of that vision involved maintaining the status quo and their sinecures. There was simply too much at stake to allow the elected leadership of a given administration to decide

weighty matters of state. Administrations came and went. The Black Dragons didn't. They represented continuity and permanence in a dangerous Washington bureaucracy and an insecure world.

So why did the Dragons care where the Diplomatic Security Service was located? In a short phrase, it was pure bureaucratic animus. The two had a *hate-hate* relationship for many years. The very notion that the State Department, and its Foreign Service appendage, could have an international law enforcement and security apparatus in its midst was largely unthinkable in their view. That was even with the Dragons controlling DS's budget, personnel systems, training regimens and operational programs—the whole shebang.

And yes, DS senior managers went forth every year at budget time, held out their collective cupped hands, and had the audacity to ask for more porridge. The humiliation and shame of the ritual was sometimes too great for DS to bear. However, the Dragons enjoyed the symbolic trappings of power and pomp. The pageantry dramatically reinforced and reminded the lesser department beings as to who was in charge.

For awhile, DS was led by a Judas lamb who slyly fed the organization into the Dragons gaping, hungry maws. DS was fodder for the insatiable appetites of the most reprehensible reptiles imaginable and their feeding frenzy knew no bounds. They gobbled up everyone and everything in their determined way—no one was safe. However, it was also an exercise in self-delusion and self-mutilation by the innocent babes-in-the-woods who believed the Dragons knew best. The DS rank-and-file didn't comprehend the implications, hidden agendas and consequences at the time. They would learn painful

lessons much later.

After all, the Dragons were gentlemen and gentlewomen who were global thinkers who truly believed that world strife and conflict were things that could be negotiated and tamed at the dinner table over drinks. They saw themselves as reasonable people talking to other reasonable people in a reasonable language in a reasonable manner. They resolutely detested change and challenge to their perquisites and authorities. With them, there was little room for open, honest discussions, disagreements or similar unpleasantness. In the end, only a thin veneer of professional rapport existed between the Dragons and their DS underlings. Mistrust was the major element that bound the two of them together.

The Dragons believed that security and law enforcement activities were low-brow endeavors best left to others. Well, if you have a thorn in your side, you should at least be able to pluck it, and that's exactly what the Black Dragons did for many decades. The Diplomatic Security Service was plucked over and over again until it couldn't be plucked any more.

DS's pitiful whimpering failed to dissuade the Dragons' from practicing their perverted sense of humor and expeditious style of management through control and containment. Maintaining their own equilibrium was of paramount importance to their survival. As a result, the security and law enforcement arm of the State Department was tightly bound in an institutional sling largely of its own making.

The Dragons simply looked down their scaly snouts and prescribed their own brand of astigmatic oversight for the organization. For awhile, rose-colored glasses were

the fashion rage in Main State's largely impotent corridors. These bureaucratic blinders were brazenly worn even as spectacular events continued to play-out abroad that argued for tougher security measures to protect people, buildings, and America's honor.

DS's treatment would change for the better over time, but not until embassies had fallen and people killed by terrorist acts caused by bureaucratic inertia and indifference. American prestige and credibility took a nosedive overseas. Adult leadership and vision were absent at the highest levels of the building. *Benign neglect* became the institutional watchwords of the day. We all patiently watched, but could do little to staunch the rise of international terrorism and its effect on American lives and interests abroad. Often overlooked, terrorist acts by Islamic extremists against U.S. interests overseas began in earnest at least two decades before the first such incident on American soil. Our embassies were bombed, our diplomats kidnapped and murdered, and our military attacked long before 9/11. We wondered when that terrible shoe would drop at home since it was all too predictable and inevitable.

But the Black Dragons game was about maintaining the status quo at all costs and ensuring they were safely ensconced in their loathsome lairs. The Dragons looked askance at the problems and hoped that whatever ugliness they saw disappeared of its own volition and good time.

Those who protected and served got a lot of practice whistling past graveyards in those days of yore.

Jersey Briggs: it was his name that got me; his first, not last. It wasn't a true Foreign Service handle like

Stape (for Stapleton), Bram (for Brampton) or Muffy (for whatever.) Avery Dick was certainly not a Foreign Service moniker either. I was still surprised that I was hired in the first place. Regardless, none of this stopped Jersey from playing-up the Ivy League, preppie image when it suited him. And suiting him entailed his wearing custom tailored garb of different stripes and colors. That was one of the things that I didn't like about him. That and the fact he was fairly competent in what he did. However, Jersey's faux, blue bloodline didn't jibe with the facts.

He grew up on the far Southside of Chicago. His father was a ward boss under Mayor Daley (senior) when the Democratic Party had a stranglehold on the garbage collection contracts in the city. Jersey grew up in solid, upper-class comfort. His family was not just well-to-do, it was filthy rich. He went to name schools in the Midwest and was a decent athlete. I knew this to be true since I conducted his background investigation. There were no secrets here among friends, or enemies for that matter.

There were other reasons why I disliked him so much. He was a rising star and I was a dwarf by comparison. I knew that, and so did he. He made it all look so easy and I had to work hard just to shine. He didn't want or need a job, even in the family business. He instead opted for public service; first with the Chicago Police Department and then with DS starting at the bottom as a junior agent like most of us. However, Jersey reveled in the life he'd created for himself. He thrived on overseas assignments as an embassy attaché, as a junior diplomat, as a mover in social circles, as a world traveler, and as someone who shared in the accouterments of a life to be lived to the fullest.

Of course, it was a life lived at taxpayer expense for the most part, but the fact never bothered Jersey or his peers in the Foreign Service aristocracy. When other agents would talk around the water cooler about tough times growing up, Jersey would quip that he had it hard too. In fact, the house where he grew up was so large it had two kitchens and he never knew where his next meal was coming from. That old joke pretty well summed up Jersey's life; one of entitlement, privilege, and self-indulgence.

However, Jersey was now serving a hardship tour in Washington, DC and couldn't wait to get back overseas. It could make him particularly prickly to deal with. That and the fact he had to meet with me and might be a wee bit testy. I wasn't suggesting Jersey had balls; only that he might be crotchety as we said. He was also a very savvy operator when he wasn't playing the slavish bozo for his superiors. Yep, that was my good friend Jersey Briggs.

Sometimes those who protected and served were much better at picking their noses than their friends.

I was escorted upstairs by Jersey's assistant, Jim, a fresh-faced kid probably just out of the Special Agent Basic Training Course and doing penance at headquarters for some minor rule infraction during his short tenure. Nowadays, one had to be almost as clean as a Mormon's white shirt just to get by. But DS didn't tolerate the term *butt boy* anymore for subordinates like Jim. Such disparaging tags were much too politically incorrect in this day and age. Regardless, Jim was Jersey's *butt boy*—no mistake about it. Personally, I thought *stud bitch* had more cachet, but that was just me.

And I wasn't being sexist in the slightest.

I didn't get Jim's last name, but I was friendly enough knowing at some future time and place I might have to deal with him since the *old boy club*, (and now girl), was still very much alive and well, thank you. Don't confuse the old boys with the Black Dragons. They were two very distinct organizational creatures. The old boys were simply trying to survive the vast, or perhaps half-vast, bureaucracy known as the State Department. It was the old "one hand washing the other" sort of thing. On the other hand, the Black Dragons were the State Department.

Jersey greeted me cordially with a big, bullshit smile. I knew then things were not going to be pleasant. I couldn't think of a wise-ass remark, so we shook hands ever-so-briefly. After which, I instinctively counted my fingers and wiped my hand on the seat of my pants for good measure and hygiene. You could never be certain what might be going around the building these days. We backed into our respective corners and awaited the bell—his opening gambit. It might not be worth much in Washington, but I didn't kneel, kiss his ring, or buss his cheeks. There was already too much ass kissing in the outfit as far as I was concerned. But I also sheepishly admitted to myself that I'd forgotten to bring my kneepads.

Jersey threw the first punch and I knew he couldn't resist. "Avery, it's been awhile, hasn't it? You retired from DS in your late fifties, about right?"

"No," I countered. "As you damn well know, I took the short exit route; out at fifty with twenty years service."

Those were the magic numbers for an immediate pension under both the Foreign Service and Federal Law

Enforcement retirement systems. DS special agents actually fell into both categories. Jersey always looked for an edge, always a barb to deflate me. Did I mention I didn't like the guy? Did I mention he was my friend?

"Still drinking and feeling sorry for your miserable self?" Jersey asked. I winced, but countered.

"Does Beth still enjoy my little gifts?" Two could play the pimping game of one-upmanship.

I would occasionally mail Jersey packages to his home. These contained women's panties and scented notes of endearment. They were gifts from fictitious lovers with fictitious return addresses. I knew his wife Beth opened all the mail and would be furious with him. Jersey sometimes had no sense of humor whatsoever.

He shot me the finger and I responded in kind. This was how close friends bonded in DS; but so much for the social pleasantries. We then moved on to the main event.

Jersey continued without blushing. I couldn't really tell if he was blushing given his deep tan. More image preening, I was sure.

"Avery, the director personally recommended you for the assignment," but then added his own nasty licks to put me in my place.

"But I'm not sure this assignment is a good fit for you or the Service," he continued. "You've been retired awhile and might have gotten a bit rusty so to speak."

"I'm really not sure you're up for the gig. One's skills go stale, the focus wanes, and the drive slows. And I'm not referring to your sex drive. It's just the normal aging thing, but without a large dose of Viagra in your case."

"Well, in my less than humble opinion, I believe I'm a good candidate for the job. Also, who else in their right mind would take the assignment? I believe your choices

are limited.”

“Well, you’ve never been right in the mind. But remember this Avery, opinions are like assholes, everyone has one.” Jersey shot back.

I thought about that remark and wondered if those who wore colostomy bags were, in fact, really without opinions. Or might a working asshole like Jersey be an exception to the rule? I decided not to argue the point.

Jersey then asked if I understood what he was saying. He must have thought I was hard of hearing too. I did understand the word *gig* and its varied definitions. I’d better be careful. Okay Jersey, my friend, back to the future. Yes, I certainly knew what he meant and resented the inference. With the Foreign Service, you didn’t realize you’d been stabbed in the back and were bleeding until you fell over dead. I kept calm, but I was pissed. It wasn’t a good start to a bad reunion.

I blasted back. “Jersey I still have most of my own teeth, get up in the morning breathing, and can remember the names of the kids I went to grade school with. I’ve already had my calling and career. I’m just looking to pick-up some pocket change. You’ve been directed to assign me to the case so let’s cut the crap and tell me what this is all about.” He really had no choice and he knew it. You’ve just been checkmated, my iffy friend. Game over.

As he thought about his retort, I glanced at the wall behind his desk; the *Wall of Shame*, as we called such things back in my day. Displayed for all to behold were the framed certificates of training, the awards, the plaques; all meaningless detritus of government service and ego. They were all very impressive and extremely

vain.

The walls had become an embarrassment to most and a persistent joke for others in the organization. I saw a photo of Jersey with Colin Powell, a photo of Jersey with a embassy Marine Security Guard Detachment somewhere overseas, his Award for Valor and, of course, the ubiquitous copper and enamel plaques with the State Department and Diplomatic Security Service crests handmade in Chile. These plaques had become commonplace in Washington over the years. The embassy in Santiago was kept very busy with orders from Washington. Some things never changed.

I couldn't pass up the shot. "Jersey, I see your wall has grown fat in the past few years, shame on you for being such an unabashed egotist, my vainglorious friend. Business and self-promotion must be good these days."

Jersey accurately responded to the effect that he at least had awards to hang on the wall. I ignored his snotty reply while continuing to scan his office.

But some things did change. Not me necessarily, but certainly the quality of government digs these days. Yeah, I said digs. It rhymes with gigs. Two could verbally fence using lame, outdated words. Oh, oh, my advanced age was showing again.

Jersey's office had pleasant, color-coordinated furnishings with carpeting and drapes, rather than standard, government issued Venetian blinds on the windows. Gone too were the gunboat gray furniture and the dingy, fly-specked fluorescent lighting.

There were no more floor ashtrays standing as solitary sentries. They'd been put into storage sometime ago, just like me. Regardless, the interior of the office was a welcome improvement over the exterior facade. Some

changes were good, aside from the building-wide smoking ban. Yes, I was a smoker. Disclosure was important in my business; not too much though, just enough to get by and conceal the important things.

Jersey slowly disclosed. He said that I'd need to get the details from the IG, but he reluctantly sketched the case outline for me.

“Avery, about two months ago, the Office of the Inspector General opened a broad fraud case against certain security contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its investigation was prompted by several anonymous allegations that seemed to have legs. The potential loss to the department through bribes, kickbacks, bill-padding, and other schemes is thought to be in the many millions of dollars. It's not the usual chump-change crimes the IG typically deals with.” He then reminded me of one obvious cause of the problems.

“The department noncompetitively contracted with a number of international security firms to provide security services to State Department facilities, operations, and personnel during the Middle East ramp-up. The contractors were also tasked to train host country law enforcement and security personnel.” He casually cited the President Karzai protective training program in Afghanistan as an example. Jersey continued his monologue since it was his show. And showmanship was always one of his strong traits.

“As always, the department is especially paranoid when it comes to adverse publicity. It doesn't want to be caught short and embarrassed. As you're aware, it doesn't have many supporters on the Hill and this disclosure, if true, could undercut what little support it

has.”

“The Hill could move programs and funds to other agencies and the department would once again lose credibility, support, and confidence within the administration. Most importantly, it might lose funding. It badly doesn’t want that to happen.”

Jersey pointed out it was all about face or dirty laundry in this instance. If there was any dirty laundry, the department wanted to be the first in town to air it. It wanted to tell everyone about the great and effective corrective actions it was now taking to prevent further instances of abuse. Internal controls would be tightened and the guilty would be punished, and the rhetoric would never end. The department needed to accentuate the positive. It needed to be proactive. In short, it needed a damn miracle to disengage from this messy tar baby of its own making.

“It’s all about spin and who gets the message out to the public first. Remember Avery, the sin is never the act itself, but not disclosing it quickly enough and making amends—*mea culpa, maxima mea culpa*. It’s the way Washington does business.”

“You know as well as I, the IG has the lead role in the department for waste, fraud, and mismanagement allegations. DS was asked to detail a special agent to the IG team given our law enforcement powers and experience in the overseas arena. It’s as simple and straightforward as that.”

He finished his spiel by telling me I was the agent being seconded to the IG. What’s the translation for me? DS, and the IG, needed someone to take the heat for them if anything went wrong during the investigation. I suspected that’s why I was being offered the big bucks

and I wasn't surprised in the slightest. Fortunately, Jersey telegraphed his punches well and he landed one last blow.

"And Avery, don't screw-up this time. You're representing DS and we have our own face to worry about. Best wishes pal and all that collegial crap." He then ordered me to snap back into the system before I met with the IG.

I was pleased to see that cynicism and real-politick were still very much alive and well in the department. Yes, I understood the dynamics; actually much too well for my own good. Moreover, these things were never as simple or straightforward as Jersey had just asserted.

I left after the customary and banal exchanges of unpleasantness. I didn't let the door hit me on the way out. Sometimes even I had some pride left. I also didn't bother smoking and joking with my former buds hanging out at the DS-designated smoking chamber by the building's front entrance because I was too depressed. I was also having serious third and fourth doubts about reenlisting in the cause.

I now fully understood why I was being offered this prune assignment. Nobody else in their right mind wanted to go to a hot war-zone to investigate massive contract fraud. Iraq or Afghanistan, it was all the same in terms of risk to one's backside. If the bad guys didn't kill you, the other bad guys would. My guess was that other agents had turned down the offer cold.

But I had swallowed the bait, hook, line, and sinker; actually, the whole trawler. I was both vulnerable and conveniently expendable to the starched collars in the tailored suits. I was needy and it must've shown: shame on me for being so obvious and oblivious. I'd be playing

the patsy to the fall guy riding the scapegoat to oblivion in this little psychodrama. The expected role didn't get much clearer or more cynical in this biz.

It made no difference to me since I wasn't in my right mind these days anyway. I also realized that some of the things Jersey mentioned about my outdated skills were true. The remarks hurt, but they were still spot on. It had been awhile since I played in the big leagues and I doubted my ability to keep up with the heavy hitters. However, I desperately needed the money.

I also needed to be a hero at least once in my sketchy, blurred life. What to do? There would be consequences, regardless. *Decision time Avery, I thought. It's time to shit or get off the pot, my friend. And remember the old saw and be careful what you wish for.* That was when I decided to carry the department's water and go quietly overseas for the miserable pricks to do their bidding. I didn't have much choice at this point. I certainly didn't want my name etched on the Main State's C Street lobby memorial wall, but I couldn't punk-out at the last minute either. All in all, it was a choice Hobson's choice.

Sometimes those who served, protected and procrastinated recognized that indecision was often decidedly decisive.

CHAPTER 2

GETTING SKINNY

I had a good feel for the way the IG did business having sparred with the office for so many years. I grudgingly admired their technical skills and professionalism. I respected and secretly envied the high morale and sense of camaraderie among its investigators.

I met with Dan Sykes and his top aides in the main IG conference room in Rosslyn, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the District. Dan and I had worked together off and on over the years. I believed we genuinely respected one another. The IG, like DS, always had to scramble for bodies for the large, complex investigations. Fortunately, those didn't come along too often. The exchange of personnel between the two investigative operations had been happening more frequently in recent years and maybe represented a permanent thawing in relations. Maybe the wall between the two would soon come down. Sure, maybe when all

the Dragons in this world were slain.

To underscore DS staffing problems in 1978, my deputy and I covered twelve diplomatic posts in East Africa. We were based at the embassy in Nairobi and traveled from Djibouti to Zambia, just like the circuit judges of old. We put out small fires at best since we simply didn't have the resources to do more. People, money, and equipment were always in short supply. Nowadays, each embassy in the world had at least one DS agent and many had more than one, along with a fat budget.

Because of this situation, we had to improvise in those days. One of the techniques to bolster our resources was to do the *good cop, bad cop* routine. However, our twist was doing it with only one person playing both roles. It was a force-multiplier as the military would say. We got pretty good at it after awhile. For example, I might be doing a subject interview with a department miscreant in say Uganda and I'd start off playing the good cop. I would then leave the room, take off my jacket, and return as the bad cop. I would continue the interrogation then once again leave the room. You guessed it. I came back wearing my jacket as the good cop—the jacket shtick was particularly effective.

We took our cues from DSM-V, specifically the chapter on multiple personality disorders. The routine would continue until we had the truth or what passed for the truth. We weren't too particular except when it came to the stats. Those were important for the purposes of promotion: either the institutional or self variety. We actually obtained a couple of confessions or what we now politely called *statements against self-interest*. I had no idea if these people were guilty of anything, other than

gullibility. However, it was the way we stretched our scarce resources in those days.

For the purists, I know what you're thinking about our less than tenuous interrogation techniques. They might have involved a little bending of the due process rules. I readily admit that we should've also advised them of their rights under the Privacy Act of 1974 before questioning them. But for what it was worth, Mr. Miranda didn't mind our egregious gaffes in the slightest. Our investigative shortcomings and shortcuts were clearly evident to anyone who bothered to look.

Sometimes those who protected and served must bewitch, bother, and bewilder their less duplicitous Foreign Service opponents and colleagues.

The briefing started at 9:00 AM on the dot, as scheduled. Its promptness reflected the new professionalism exhibited by the organization. Those who investigated the fraud, waste and abuse of others must not cast the first stone. Dan had put together a Power-Point presentation on the fraud situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. His first click showed a piece from the *Christian Science Monitor*. A former senior advisor to the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which ran the country until the election of an interim Iraqi government, said the U.S. government's refusal to prosecute U.S. firms accused of corruption was turning the country into a free fraud zone. *That was a nice starting point*, I mused. The term also had a catchy ring to it.

The official compared Iraq to the Wild West and with only \$4.1 billion of the \$18.7 billion the U.S. government set aside for the reconstruction of Iraq having been

spent, the lack of action suggested that the corruption would only worsen over time. More than money was at stake though. The administration had harshly criticized the United Nations over the hundreds of millions stolen from the Oil-for-Food Program under Saddam Hussein. But the program's successor, created under the occupation, and called the Development Fund for Iraq, involved billions of potentially misused dollars.

"The IGs of all the federal agencies with a major stake in this situation have united to conduct a massive, coordinated investigation of waste, fraud, and mismanagement in both Iraq and Afghanistan," Dan explained, clicking to the next slide, which showed a list of the agencies involved.

"Let me guess," I cut in. "Iraq's the nine-hundred-pound gorilla in all this, right?"

Dan grimaced like his stomach hurt. It was funny how many higher-ups tended to look like their ulcers were painning them when I was around.

"Right," he replied. "The vast majority of government funding is going to contracts there." He clicked to a slide of a pie chart with a big red slice marked Iraq and a very large sum of money below the label.

"I've already got a team of auditors on the ground going over the books of several companies," Dan went on, clicking to a list of the companies in question. "Confidential sources have come forward alleging that these companies have committed significant misdeeds."

"Hold on," I interrupted again. I wasn't too concerned about breaking into the Assistant IG's train of thought; after all, he had his little slide-show to remind him where he'd left off. "What does 'significant misdeeds' mean? Embezzlement? Slave labor? Mass murder?"

“Our sources claim that billing invoices are being padded, local officials are being bribed, services and products aren’t rendered, yet we’re still charged for bogus, nonexistent deliverables under the terms of the contracts.” Dan answered stiffly, brushing an imaginary fleck of dirt from the sleeve of his custom-tailored gray suit. “Needless to say, we’re taking all such allegations very seriously, as they may add up to millions of dollars in losses to the department.”

Sure enough, Dan had a slide about the alleged misdeeds, too. As his precise voice continued summarizing the contents of the newspaper article projected on the screen, I tried to stay focused on the information, but the dimmed lights were making it difficult to keep my eyes open, and I found my mind wandering.

Is this all I have to look forward to? I asked myself. Solving white-collar crimes for pencil-pushers like this guy? And how long will even that last, before I’m recalled to get fat behind a desk until too much junk food, too much booze alone at night, too many cigarettes, and too little activity of body and mind bring on a stroke that’ll kill me if I’m lucky? Jesus, how long will I rot in my bed before anyone finds my body? I took a sip of coffee to clear my head. Hey, cheer up, I told myself. It might not be so bad. Maybe you’ll be fatally shot while trying to prevent the escape of a desperate corrupt CEO on this mission—go out in a blaze of glory. It’ll be almost like the old days. Smirking at that idea, I forced my attention back to the briefing.

The *Washington Post* reported that both the Clinton and Bush administrations knew that monies used in the

Oil-for-Food Program were lining the pockets of Saddam Hussein—and that both administrations had done little to stop it. Allegations surfaced, in unclassified State Department documents sent to congressional committees with oversight of U.S. foreign policy, strongly hinting that Turkey and Jordan were ignoring the sanctions against Iraq. One corruption case had already drawn particular attention in government circles. This involved the case of two former employees of Custer Battles, a high profile, private security firm operating in Iraq to provide security services to the U.S. government.

The whistle blowers alleged that the company had set up shell companies in the Cayman Islands to falsely bill the government on two Iraq contracts. The Justice Department gave strong support to the civil suit brought by the two. It concluded that the company had defrauded the authorities out of tens of millions of dollars. Twice before, the U.S. government had declined to participate in the case when asked by the plaintiffs' lawyers. The judge, however, had asked if federal fraud law applied only to when the contract was administered by the Coalition Provisional Authority that governed Iraq for a year prior to the establishment of an interim government?

Lawyers for Custer Battles argued that the CPA was an international authority and thus U.S. laws could not be applied to the case. They asserted that the U.S. government had privately stated that the CPA was actually a multinational entity, not an arm of the U.S. government. Therefore, the U.S. government could not be defrauded. Lawyers for the whistle-blowers pointed out, however, that President George W. Bush had signed a 2003 law authorizing \$18.7 billion to go to U.S. authorities in Iraq, including the CPA, as an entity of the

U.S. government. Several Custer Battles contracts also referred to the other party as the *United States of America*. So the CPA was, in fact, a U.S. government entity or that was argument to be decided.

A comprehensive examination by the CPA's own inspector general had uncovered evidence of millions of dollars' worth of fraud, waste and abuse. Its final report noted that U.S. civilian authorities had failed to keep track of nearly one billion dollars in Iraq money spent for reconstruction projects and couldn't produce records to show whether they got the services and products they paid for.

For example, it found that the CPA had paid nearly two hundred thousand dollars for fifteen police trucks without confirming that they were delivered. Auditors could not locate them. Officials also didn't have paperwork to justify the \$24.7 million price tag for replacing the Iraqi currency, which used to carry the face of Saddam Hussein. In one case, a U.S. senior advisor manipulated the contracting system to award a \$7.2 million security contract. The contract was subsequently voided and the money returned to Uncle Sam.

In another incident, a contractor billed for nonexistent personnel working on an oil pipeline repair project. Moreover, the security firm guarding the pipeline overcharged the CPA a measly twenty thousand dollars. Besides more than two dozen criminal cases opened by the CPA's Inspector General, thirty-five others were referred to other U.S. agencies for further investigation.

The report was the most sweeping and damning indication that some U.S. officials and private contractors had repeatedly violated the law in the free-wheeling atmosphere that pervaded the multi-billion dollar effort to

rebuild the war-torn country. Before Dan could transition to a new topic, I put up my hands in a “T” shape indicating it was time for a break. We’d been going non-stop for at least ninety minutes. I badly needed to smoke and pee, and in that order.

Recess was soon over and it was back to the classroom. Dan, the schoolmarm, said that the corruption problems went far beyond U.S. contractors and international firms. The head of the Commission on Public Integrity, an agency set up by the CPA to fight fraud committed by Iraqis, said he faced many obstacles in fighting corruption in Iraq, especially from high government officials urging him not to work so hard.

Dan then changed direction and mentioned that his focus was primarily on the security contractors operating under State Department contracts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. These were the places where mega-bucks were at greatest play. He said that virtually all of the fraud allegations his office had received so far had originated in Iraq and involved the companies working there.

He noted most of the security service contracts, and most others for that matter, were sole-source, meaning they weren’t competitively bid prior to being awarded. Most contracts fell into the category. The contractors had to satisfy unrealistic government-set timetables for reconstruction projects. Time was of the essence in rebuilding Iraq. In one massive, fell-swoop, weapons of mass destruction had to be found and dismantled, terrorism rooted-out and thwarted, and democratic institutions and infrastructures established in the troubled region.

He pointed out that the United States had gradually

increased the types of tasks and roles for which it contracted private companies in Afghanistan and Iraq in military theaters. It was generally accepted that using private, unarmed contractors to carry out supply, support and logistical operations were appropriate and cost effective ways for the military and the State Department to operate. But Iraq, and to a much lesser extent Afghanistan, now employed upwards of twenty to thirty thousand U.S. citizens and third country nationals to supply a wide variety of security services. The actual numbers were squishy and hard to come by.

Given troop shortages, private security contractors were widely viewed as vital to U.S. efforts to stabilize and reconstruct the countries. Circumstances often forced these contractors to take on tactical combat roles traditionally handled by the military. The practice came with a price tag though. Approximately two hundred and fifty security contractors had been killed, mostly in Iraq. Many more had been injured as a result of their duties. For many, the adrenaline-rush was intense and the money plentiful. However, the ultimate cost of employment could be extraordinarily high.

Dan said there were a number of major U.S. and international security firms operating in both countries. He ticked-off the names of Blackwater, DynCorp International, Custer Battles, Ajax Security and Protective Services, Armor Group, Aegis Defense Services, and Triple Canopy. These were the big dogs of the kennel. Lesser firms only got scraps from Uncle Sam's abundant, overflowing table. But only Blackwater, Triple Canopy and DynCorp could perform under the State Department's *Personal Protective Security* contract in Iraq. That was an interesting approach to fostering

competition and literally getting the best bang for the buck for Uncle Sam.

Dan concluded his briefing by telling me that I was going to Afghanistan to look into the contracts awarded to Ajax Security and Protection Services. I'd be the only investigator assigned to the country since the monies at risk, along with potential losses, were much greater in Iraq. Resources were divvied up accordingly and I would be a one-man show in Afghanistan's big-top circus. I generally enjoyed standing tall in the center ring, but not as a bulls-eye. I hoped nobody screamed *fire* during my performance. That could mean a premature curtain call. I wanted to gracefully bow-out of this bureaucracy of the absurd, but eventually and on my own terms.

There hadn't been any serious allegations of fraud against Ajax, just the garden variety complaints about waste of taxpayer monies. Of course there was waste because it was the federal government after all. Citizen expectations of their public servants were just too damn high and overly demanding. My job was to sort out the legitimate waste from the illegal variety. That meant I would have to sharpen my pencil and get my hands dirty.

Dan provided me with all the files he had on Ajax to review. I spent the next three hours taking notes. I noticed a few things suggesting fraud, but couldn't be sure until I got to Kabul and hit the ground running. However, I would treat them as potential Title 18 criminal code violations until disproved.

I now had my orders. I'd bravely march to Afghanistan to track down and apprehend any overtly greedy, naughty people who might be skimming taxpayer money. I'd be a hero, at least in my own, impressionable mind and that was good enough for me.

Sometimes those who served and protected realized that white collar thugs preferred button-down shirts to black ski masks.

CHAPTER 3

PALADIN, PALADIN — ARE YOU STILL ROAMING?

I was going to roam a long way from home, perhaps for a long time. Okay, for the record, I wasn't going to Rome and I most certainly wasn't being received at the Vatican by the Pope. I'd be doing penance for my sins elsewhere. How long I'd be gone depended on what I found in Afghanistan. My marching orders were clear: find out what was going on and identify the bad guys. Oh sure, easy-peasy.

I walked directly to Continental's First Class counter and presented my tickets. The agent looked at them and pointed out that I was in the wrong line, politely informing me I was ticketed for Business, not First Class. I had to go over to the next line and wait my turn. Fortunately, she didn't add *like the other little people*. I told her there must be some terrible mistake since my employer, the U.S. Department of State, United States of America, was infallible and omniscient. I insisted that I was most certainly booked into First Class and that I had to contact my home office for clarification of this most distasteful and shocking matter. My harrumphing didn't help a bit.

I then stepped aside from the counter and pulled my cell phone from my jacket pocket. I hit the speed dial button for 867-5309/*Jenny*. (That wasn't the number for *Jenny Craig* for those weight challenged.) It was the number popularized by Tommy Tutone in his 1982 one-hit song. I'd stored the number in my cell phone many years before knowing it would never be answered. It had been disconnected due to the overwhelming number of phone calls to the actual subscriber. I'd run this ruse once or twice before and now tried again.

Within earshot of the agent, I pretended to speak with the State Department's Travel Section. I was very adept at this given my days doing the "good cop, bad cop" routine overseas. I asked to be connected to a supervisor. *No, I wouldn't accept anyone else. I don't deal with little people.* I did the obligatory wait, fussing and fidgeting as I did.

I walked in small circles, but always close enough for the agent to hear my side of the conversation. I finally got the imaginary supervisor on the line. I detested waiting

for others. I calmly explained my circumstances; specifically, that someone had obviously screwed up my reservation. I made it clear that I was very disappointed with Continental's attitude and agent's demeanor. The State Department should seriously reconsider its relationship with the airline.

I told my phone that the treatment I was receiving at the counter was wholly unacceptable since I was a diplomat and deserved better. I made several furtive glances at the agent to see if she were listening. Given her demeanor and body language she was—big-time. She was also warming up and she shot me a smile or two.

I continued the conversation along these lines for a couple more minutes and raised my voice once or twice for the desired effect. At one point, I directly turned to the agent and made a circling motion with my finger around my right ear. I shrugged and raised my eyebrows a couple of times as well.

I finally hung up and walked to the counter. This time, the agent didn't suggest that I go to the next line. I explained things to her that she already knew: the government was fucked-up. It was comprised of pinheaded people afflicted with anal-cranial-anal, double inversion. They were all a bunch of incompetent fools. Yes, I knew we had to tolerate them, regardless of the heavy burden they placed on the American working class taxpayer. I didn't know what one of those looked like, but it sounded pompous and appropriate.

I told her that I was going to Afghanistan to serve our country for these worthless bastards. It was a dangerous assignment, but we all needed to serve our great nation as best we could under difficult circumstances. Down

deep, we were all patriots and compatriots, I reminded her. Fortunately, she readily agreed with my somewhat logical and entirely jingoistic reasoning. My ploy actually worked to my surprise.

I ended up getting a free upgrade to First Class. As it turned out, the flight was only half empty, or half full, depending on how you see the glass. I was entitled to use the First Class lounges in Newark and Delhi, if I wished. I certainly wished. I also snagged double bonus miles for my efforts.

Sometimes life was fair and good for a change for those who served and protected themselves first and foremost.

I located a Starbucks, got my coffee, and headed to the nearest dual-gender handicap restroom. I entered, locked the door behind me, and put down the toilet seat. I reached for my pack of cigarettes. Fourteen hours and twenty minutes was a damn long flight—not to mention the give or take. I needed a super nicotine fix that would help me get through the ordeal. Like many, I'd quit smoking innumerable times over the years. I had tried the patch but found I couldn't get it lighted after rolling it. I also couldn't get it to draw despite how hard I sucked on it. I finally gave up the patch after experiencing severe groin pain. Going cold turkey was no better. The thought of walking around holding a twenty pound, frozen Butterball was simply too much for me. I was afraid of frostbite, but more afraid of premature thawing. I was worried about that groin thing too. Moreover, I did have a certain personal image and professional stature to maintain as a Foreign Service officer and, much more importantly, a special DS special agent.

I chain-smoked six cigarettes in about twelve minutes. Maybe it was close to a record. I didn't care; it was still my personal best. I was wired and feeling on top of the world until the knock on the door—*Jiggers, the cops*, I thought. I quickly turned up the fan, but it was too little, too late. It turned out to be the attendant who wanted to clean the bathroom. I immediately seized the high-ground from her. Kindly remember, we liked all things of action in the department, as long as they were verbal, and not overly aggressive or offensive in tone or manner. As diplomats, we were usually amiable, personable sweet-talkers; unless there were personal agendas at stake.

I told her that some thoughtless smoker had just left. I did some coughing to suggest that I was suffering. I asked her if there wasn't some ordinance or law prohibiting smoking in airports. I told her that the crime was especially heinous since it occurred in a restroom for the handicapped. I mentioned that, if I were in charge, such things would most assuredly not happen. The guilty would be swiftly punished for their unspeakable acts, serving as a strong deterrent to others so inclined to break the rules. The nation's health was at risk and such behavior shouldn't be tolerated by law abiding citizens. After I put her in her place, I dramatically stooped over, drooled a bit, and limped off to my gate; at least until I turned a corner.

I can't tell you much about the flight since I slept most of the way. The Xanax-wine combo must have helped me sleep. I awakened about two hours out of Delhi and felt relaxed. The flight and its arrival in Delhi were unremarkable and I went straight to the Radisson near the airport and checked-in.

The next morning I got up and had breakfast in the VIP lounge. This was one sweet deal since my special room rate included a full breakfast, plus free snacks and drinks throughout my stay. It almost was like being comped at Vegas, but without the glitter. *Elvis must've already left the room*, I thought.

I figured I could shave a little off my per diem and pocket the difference. I liked being special, both as a VIP and as a special agent. I checked out the next morning with the Indian desk clerks and bellmen lining up and cheerily waving me good-bye. The natives really were friendly; once you figured out how to correctly connect the dots.

There must be an amazing number of Ash Wednesdays in Delhi, I mused. I dutifully paid homage to a statue of Lord Ganesh in the lobby and crossed myself on my way out the door. I liked to hedge my bets. I then caught the Air India flight to Kabul.

Sometimes those who protected and served were just savvy, wise-ass, world-weary travelers.

The flight to Kabul lasted two hours. We flew over rugged mountain ranges and dun-colored earth. As the plane dropped into the Kabul valley, I recalled the Kam Air flight that had crashed in 2005 approaching the same airport with all 105 souls aboard killed. Thank God I'd paid my respects to Lord Ganesh and Lord Jesus shortly before. I wasn't superstitious in the slightest, but I still tightened my seatbelt another notch.

We touched down safely and taxied to the terminal while the attendants rolled out the hard-stand stairs. I then deplaned and walked the short distance to the terminal while tightly clutching my orange goodie bag and

briefcase. I entered the building and stood in the immigration line and presented the officer my passport. He unceremoniously inked and initialed an entry stamp next to my visa. I waited for my single suitcase for about twenty five minutes. But time was apparently an elusive thing in Afghanistan. I then proceeded through the customs checkpoint without even a cursory glance from the lounging officials.

I had just missed another great opportunity to act-out and spar with the natives. I enjoyed playing the role of an overly-officious official. I'd had a lot of practice over the years. The local gatekeepers were customarily a bunch of spoiled-sports when it came to matters of diplomatic protocol. I'd always hoped to be PNG'ed early-on to avoid the inevitable pain and misery I would suffer later in these backwater shit-burgs. By the way, that was the host government's official act of declaring a diplomat *persona non grata*—clearly an offensive Latin term in my opinion. No, I was not referring to shit-burgs.

I hailed a taxi just outside the main entrance to the terminal. My driver's name was Mohammed and I called him Moe for short. We Americans were nothing if not casual and friendly. Moe didn't speak the King's English. Truthfully, Moe really spoke no English to speak of. However, I quickly established rapport because that was important in my business. To that end, I leaned over and hawked a sizable Loogie on the front passenger seat for Moe to see. By the surprised look on his face, I could tell I had achieved my objective.

I knew that this was the proper way to chase away evil spirits and bring good luck. (I later found out this quaint custom was only practiced in certain parts of remote

China.) I then used internationally recognized and accepted hand signals and body gestures to tell him where I wanted to go. I tugged on my left ear indicating *sounds like* as in charades. We were all good at playing charades in the department. We then took off towards the embassy. I hoped to God we were heading in the right direction.

Moe's taxi was an ancient Russian Neva sedan he'd bought from a Soviet army major some years earlier. It'd been totally wrecked in a road mishap with a herd of goats. The Afghan Ministry of Transportation's Rules-of-the-Road booklet always gave right-of-way to the kids. His vehicle lacked many basic amenities: no air conditioning, operable brakes, radio or glass for two of its windows. All of its tires were scalped to their casings. I felt safe since I figured we couldn't go more than ten miles an hour—tops. I figured wrong.

I guessed Moe got his money's worth out of his Afghan Automobile Association membership. We got no further than a block from the terminal before the car stalled. Moe yelled something in a foreign language to two youngsters playing nearby. They got behind the taxi and pushed it until it reached a speed fast enough for Moe to pop the clutch and get it started. I now understood how Triple-A worked here. However, there was no such thing as an AARP chapter in the country. To survive, Afghans could neither be shy nor retiring.

Driving in Kabul was like playing Russian roulette with a loaded Smith Sixty and correctly guessing the outcome. Goats, donkey carts, people, dogs and other flotsam and jetsam freely co-mingled. Curbs, sidewalks, and road dividers were largely missing from the scene. Few traffic signals could be seen in the downtown. There were no

posted or enforced speed limits. *Might means right*, alright. The most aggressive drivers in the largest vehicles had the right of way. Gas tankers got particularly wide berth since the recent uptick in vehicle suicide attacks.

Driving at night in Kabul was even more suicidal. Vehicles without headlights, brake lights or fear meandered and careened through the streets without any discernible purpose or destination. My throat soon got hoarse from yelling out all the *padiddles* and I quickly lost interest in the game. I adamantly refused to play *punch buggy* while riding with overseas natives. I had a reputation and shoulder to uphold, thank you. The passing scene reminded me of one humongous, overly-crowded souk. In other words, the whole thing was hugely bizarre.

As Moe and I continued to bond while driving to the embassy, I looked at the humble stalls and shops lining the busy city streets. Many of the buildings were simple mud brick hovels with wood-shuttered windows. Wares were displayed outside for all to see and buy. The people wore a mix of Western-style clothing and traditional Muslim garb. The former didn't mean cowboy hats and chaps. The latter meant that few women wore dresses in public and most wore the traditional burkas. However, those only came in two colors—black and blue, the newly-adopted national colors of this bruised and battered country.

Moe dropped me several hundred yards from the embassy compounds. We couldn't go any farther because of the massive security barriers and controls. As we pulled to a stop, I took off my wristwatch and presented it to him. In my best Arabic sign language, I

told Moe it was a gift from one friend to another. I told him that true friends don't ask money of each other for such favors. That's simply not what friends do. Moe was confused, so I explained that the watch held great sentimental value. It had been passed down on my father's side of my family from eldest son to eldest son over several generations, a family heirloom and a great source of timeless joy.

I explained to him that it was a Timex, a precious treasure that *takes a licking and keeps on ticking*—just like the proud people of Afghanistan. It had actually stopped working several years ago, much like Moe's country. *All things had value and utility under the right circumstances*, I mused. He finally understood what I was saying and thanked me for my generosity and friendship. Moe actually beamed at me and I beamed too. We shook hands and embraced as strong men do in this part of the world. I'd just made another friend for America.

The taxi ride ended up costing the government eighteen dollars and forty-two cents, plus tip. I was typically a generous tipper with other people's money. Fortunately, receipts were considered *passé* and a waste of scarce paper in Afghanistan. I was sure Mohammed would be an easy name for the auditors to track-down. Men lived by their words, not deeds, here.

Moe didn't have to watch out for himself; in fact, he didn't really need a watch to tell time. The mosques' mullahs called daily prayers precisely at sunrise and sunset. In his culture, Moe would never consider buying such an extravagant luxury like a watch for himself. That would be a terrible sin of hubris. Importantly, hubris and Jews were not tolerated in the Muslim faith. So with this gift, I not only gave him a special remembrance, but also

saved him from the hellish fires of eternal damnation. As a result, I did Moe a huge favor. I felt proud as I always do under such circumstances. Good deeds should always be rewarded.

Sometimes those who served and protected were culturally aware, sensitive people who were shining paradigms for others of this ungracious world.

CHAPTER 4

EMBASSY REDOUBT, NO DOUBT

I sometimes had difficulty remembering the difference between Afghans and Afghanis. My colleagues would sometimes chide me on my little grammatical lapses. But I finally figured the difference out. The bad guys were Afghan hounds who sniffed out illicit money, Afghanis or Euros or whatever coin of the realm. It made no difference to them. I would only learn this little bit of local trivia later.

I rolled my bags and myself to the chancery located on one of two compounds, about two hundred yards distant. The chancery, or the chancellery, or the head-shed, is the building housing the chief of mission and staff, more

commonly called the ambassador and the worker bees. *Embassy* generally referred to all the buildings, people, authorities and other things falling under the authority of the chief of mission. The terms were often used interchangeably.

Nobody particularly cared and everyone understood the meanings. They were still terms referring to Old Glory flying from a pole firmly implanted in the soil of a foreign country. The receiving nation got the power and prestige of United States presence and its largesse. Those nations not only shared in its proud symbiotic symbolism, but sometimes had to endure our stiff shaft. That was because there were no free lunches anymore. Foreign friendships and dining out could be expensive these days. Sometimes we Americans needed to be careful what we wished for ourselves and others of this world.

I was stopped at the outer perimeter check-point manned by three, uniformed Afghan police officers. The checkpoint controlled further access to the street and pedestrian entrances. It consisted of stacked sandbags about six feet high encircling a guard shack. The vehicle drop-bars, gates, and barbed wire completed the picture. The police were carrying the all-so-common AK-47 assault rifles; probably donated by the Soviets some years earlier. They looked bored and tired. I tried to look the same to put them at ease. It was easy since I was already terribly tired and bored.

I promptly presented my State Department photo ID to them. They couldn't read English, but immediately noticed the age difference between me and the person in the photograph. They looked at each other, at me, and then again at each other. They shrugged and I shrugged in return. I had anticipated this problem, so I decided to

wear the same shirt and tie I'd worn for my 1974 picture. I pointed out this fact to them and was waved through without being searched. Don't forget: everything had value or utility under the right circumstances.

Fifty yards on, I came to the inner perimeter checkpoint. It was manned by gringos carrying ubiquitous M-4 assault rifles; probably to be donated by the Americans a few years in the future. These guys were contractors working for Ajax. In addition to the standard physical security accouterments, there was a Hilux pickup truck with a fifty-caliber machine gun mounted in its bed and it was impolitely pointing in my direction. I promptly presented my diplomatic passport for inspection. That document spared me the indignity, but also the pleasure, of being strip-searched and body cavity-probed.

Sometimes luck cut both ways for those who served and protected.

I walked the next hundred yards or so and came to the chancery's pedestrian entrance, an enormous single door fitted into the massive nine foot high stone and brick wall surrounding the compound. I hit the intercom button and was shortly greeted by a burly Gurkha guard smartly dressed in a pressed, clean uniform. Had I known this would happen, I would've insisted on banging on a huge doorknocker to announce that I'd arrived safe and sound at the chancery's outer gate. Then I'd click my heels together three times and gotten the hell out of there, but no such luck. No Dorothy, this wasn't Kansas, my dear. Once inside, the guard checked my passport and pointed me towards the Visitors Reception Center, a short walk away. The center was a fortified building designed to receive and verify the credentials of all visitors to the

chancery compound. There was an armed guard who operated the magnetometer and X-ray equipment. Everything and everyone was searched before further admittance. A hand-held metal detector was passed over a person's body. All items were x-rayed and personal belongings were also swabbed for explosives residue. All in all, it was a very thorough, demeaning, but necessary, experience.

Of course, everything and everyone excluded those VIPs holding a diplomatic passport, a State Department ID card and a set of DS agent credentials. I presented all three items to the clerk inside the bullet proof glass enclosure. I next dutifully filled out the visitors log and was issued a temporary embassy ID. I'd swear to wear it at all times, although I had my fingers crossed behind my back—scout's honor.

Before entering the chancery, I stopped by the small memorial to Spike Dubbs, our ambassador to Afghanistan who had been kidnapped, tied to a chair, brutally tortured by his terrorist captors, and then, by an ironic twist of fate, killed during a failed rescue attempt by the Soviets in 1979. The memorial was a simple bronze plaque laid in the ground that eloquently spoke of Spike's service and dedication to his country. Spike was never a Black Dragon. He had too much integrity, dignity, and class for such nonsense. Yes, bad shit happened to good people, especially overseas in violent lands. I dutifully paid my respects and entered the chancery. My due diligence was now done and there was nothing more to do.

The chancery lobby was configured as a *man-trap*. No, it wasn't a place for embassy women to hook-up; it was a term that described its physical security controls. The

lobby exterior and interior doors were constructed of ballistic armor and met stringent forced-entry standards. All walls were equally hardened. In the event of an incident, the Marine security guard on duty flipped a switch and locked down all entry points. The bad guys couldn't enter the chancery proper and the good guys couldn't enter the lobby and inadvertently walk into a dangerous situation. I presented my credentials and identifications once again, but this time to the Marine on duty. This location was called Post #1 in embassy-speak. I then asked to see Larry Bumpkiss, the embassy's senior regional security officer. Unfortunately, I couldn't put off meeting with him any longer. I braced myself for what was likely to be an unpleasant encounter.

Larry and I were both *alpha silverbacks* in DS-speak: old and grizzled agents who wholly disdained department rules and regulations. His DS nom de guerre was *Larry the Fairy*. But it wasn't intended as an unkind reference to his masculinity. Rather, he acted like Tinker Bell: he would sprinkle pixie dust over himself and wish real hard for his problems to go away. They miraculously disappeared and he continued to live a charmed life. We were not friends to put it mildly. We kept our respective distances when we could, although this time we couldn't. Like Jersey Briggs, I was in charge of DS's Office of Investigations and Counterintelligence before I retired. That was when Larry had appeared on the radar screen for a youthful indiscretion. That's what the DS pundits called such things in my day.

Larry was then assigned to DS's Foreign Dignitary Protection Division. He also had his federal firearms dealer's license from the ATF and had developed the little sideline of selling guns, and other less lethal gear,

over the years to supplement his meager department salary. He did well at the trade through cultivating a wide network of federal law enforcement officials, police officers, and other customers who could discreetly buy their off-duty, or off-the-record, firearms from him at a fairly reasonable price.

My interest was in the firearms he was shipping overseas through the diplomatic pouch system; a *no-no*, to put it ever so bluntly. Through his reputation and contacts, Larry shipped guns abroad to DEA agents, DS agents, Customs Service agents, FBI agents, and others assigned to our embassies. Larry's business model got around sales taxes, export licensing regulations, shipping costs, customs inspections, and other unnecessary unpleasantness.

What Larry didn't anticipate was that those weapons sometimes ended up in the hands of foreign police and security officials as gifts; specifically those officials friendly with the alphabet agents already mentioned. Occasionally, these foreign officials were linked to human rights violations in their respective countries.

Sometimes those who served and protected were unknowing entrepreneurs by arming others abusing and torturing innocent people.

Larry should have joined the *Disney on Ice* show, since he skated on that one, and lesser technical infractions over subsequent years. He was what we called a Terminal One. Foreign Service-one was his pay grade or class in the personnel system. It was the rough equivalent to a GS-15 for those OCD'ers compelled to compare numbers to the Civil Service pay scale. It was a senior position, but he would never get through threshold

review to enter the Senior Foreign Service.

His colleagues knew that to be true, those who served on his promotion panel each year knew that. And Larry knew that as well. That was the reason he volunteered for a one-year assignment in Kabul. He would retire from here. By doing so, he would substantially boost his pension since his danger pay and hardship allowances would be factored into his overall highest three years of service. He planned to retire to Sandpoint, Idaho and live with other right-minded Americans.

Every October, the department published the list of Foreign Service officers promoted during the year's review cycle. It was an extremely competitive system. Each year, all employee performance appraisals were reviewed by the promotion panels convened for each pay grade or class in the Foreign Service. It was not only competitive, but it ranked people rather than positions.

The system was much like the military in that regard. It was also like the military as it was an up or out system. If you were not promoted through the class system within prescribed time limits, you would not be up, you would be out. That rarely happened, as the time allotted in class, and at each grade level, was fairly generous. You really had to go out of your way to be what was politely called *selected out* of the Foreign Service for time-in-class.

The Foreign Service promotion list, or *The List*, was a source of great discussion and speculation in the weeks before publication. Everyone wanted to know if he or she had made it. They also speculated who else might be on it. These were critical things since they carried not only personal remuneration, ego reward, onward assignments and career aspirations, but their very lives—the guessing never stopped.

Someone would claim that so and so had made The List or wasn't on The List. It was gospel. He or she had heard it directly from a friend of someone whose bother-in-law was serving on the promotion panel. It didn't get any better than that as a reliable source; a done deal and a slam-dunk. Sometimes the guessing turned out to be correct, but most often it did not.

In DS, we had a special way of congratulating the lame sycophants who were promoted on The List over much more deserving peers. We anonymously mailed them Hallmark greeting cards to their homes. These were the ones with the audio chips that spoke or played a little song or both when you opened the card. The intended recipient would open the card and be bombarded with some sentimental crap about his birthday or Mother's Day or expressions of deep sorrow about his passing. *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy Birthday dear Johnny, happy birthday to you, how old are you?* This quaint practice became known as *gifting*.

The cards were reserved for the not-so gifted agents of the organization. Larry had been so honored a couple of times over the course of his career. Unfortunately, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service subsequently put an end to our little fun. We considered it spirited, good natured joking among colleagues. The inspectors considered it a potential violation of federal law.

Sometimes those who served and protected didn't always share a droll sense of humor.

Larry and I didn't even bother to shake hands. Such things were not condoned in the department between old enemies. He immediately slugged me, verbally speaking.

"Look what turned up on my doorstep. I must've

forgotten to wipe my shoes this morning,” chuckling at the thought and image. “You shouldn’t be here without permission. You know the rules, bucko. Why didn’t you request a country clearance like every other swinging dick?”

A *country clearance* was the formal embassy process granting approval for my visit. A *swinging dick* was an unkind reference to me. I purposely avoided alerting the post about my arrival in order to secure a small advantage over the opposition. The opposition consisted of anyone opposing my investigation; especially a DS special agent named Larry Bumpkiss.

To clear the air, I quipped “I’ve already got security and medical clearances and don’t need any more, thank you. Larry, I’m no longer bound by the rules governing mere mortals like you since I’m now working under the aegis of the IG and its independent authorities and powers.” I was being my usual caustic, clever, and obnoxious self.

Larry didn’t like my reply, but he couldn’t do a damn thing about it because it was true and he knew it. I had broad independence and discretion in conducting my investigation. Besides, I didn’t care what Larry thought, as long as it thoroughly pissed him off.

I went straight to the obligatory explanation of why I was here. I didn’t have to do this, but it was good form on my part under the circumstances.

“Larry, I’m investigating Ajax Security and Protective Services for possible Title 18 criminal violations relating to fraud, bribery and any other corruption I might come across. Any indiscretions most likely happened on your watch so any fallout is going to come down on your neck, my friend. By the way, how close are you to retiring.”

Larry grimaced. I smirked and farted loud enough for him to hear.

Larry had already heard the rumblings of the investigation through the department's overly-ripe grapevine. If more than one person knew a secret in Washington, it was no longer a secret. I disingenuously asked for his support and cooperation. He genuinely told me to go fuck myself. We fingered each other as I left his office.

Larry grudgingly assigned me one of his nine assistant RSOs to help me settle into the routine. He was honor bound to do no less for a DS colleague. The assistant's name was Chuck Tanner who had been at post for about ten months, with two more to go.

Chuck had mistakenly loaded a bit of software on his computer to track his time left in country. It was a colorful, animated picture of a wall clock. The big hand would automatically and graphically count-down the days and hours remaining on Chuck's tour. To boost his sagging morale, it randomly generated audio pop-ups which impolitely reminded him what a fucking retard, dumb-shit and/or jerk-off he was for accepting the assignment to Kabul. These were exemplars of the more kindly appellations the twisted timepiece subjected him to. Its canned voices always tried to uncannily one-up Chuck at every turn. It would speak in especially harsh tongues late in the day when he was tired and most vulnerable.

The clock constantly spewed cruel and unrelenting putdowns. It also maliciously skewed the true time so Chuck would think he had more days to serve on his sentence. "Ha, ha, Chuck," the voices would nastily taunt. He couldn't wait for his clock to be cleaned or for his

onward assignment to Paris. Whichever came first was okay with him. He was one of the walking-wounded; a classic burnout case, but he didn't realize it. That was because he fit in so well with the other embassy staffers.

Chuck snapped my photo for a permanent embassy pass that would allow me virtually unrestricted access to both compounds. I asked him to issue me a Remington 870 pump shotgun and rounds of #4 buck and he did so. He also handed me a large stack of paper regarding embassy security and safety protocols. I signed an acknowledgment form attesting I had read and understood every single word. I swore on my boy scout's honor that every attestation was true and correct, to the best of my knowledge. My veracity was once again being tested by the system. I wouldn't let it fail me again.

He then took me to my assigned living quarters located on the other compound. We passed the barber shop, the post office, the expendable supplies office, and the currency exchange. Each was housed in a converted CONEX box, a large shipping container modified for office use.

We continued walking, but instead of exiting the way I had entered, we passed through an underground tunnel connecting the two compounds. This had been created as a security measure to keep staff safe from the Taliban's improvised explosive devices and any contact with our allies and wards: the Afghan people. We exited the other side and were immediately confronted by more shipping containers that served as housing for contractors, visitors, consultants, and lesser beings in the embassy hierarchy. Real Foreign Service personnel lived in new apartments on the other compound near the swimming pool and tennis court.

We turned a corner and that's when Chuck uttered that dreadful word—*hooch*. That was where I would live: in a hooch! I stopped in my tracks, broke out in a cold sweat and tried to regain my composure. Any word or thing Vietnam caused a flashback to that troubled time in my life. Just the merest hint or suggestion of anything V and I would awaken screaming at the top of my lungs in middle of the night.

I tried to control my night terrors, but just couldn't seem to make them stop. The truth really did dramatically emerge from the subconscious mind in such situations. In my case, I had a terrible fear of being drafted and shipped-off to V. I sometimes wondered if I suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. In retrospect, I should've applied for a disability pension when I retired from the department. That would have been the financially honorable thing to do. Jeez, that old hindsight thing had just raised its ugly head again to remind me of a missed opportunity.

Chuck looked at me with raised eyebrows. That was standard DS nonverbal code-speak indicating that someone was having a major panic attack and emotional meltdown. I pulled my shirt over my head and breathed deeply to stop hyperventilating. We all had used this remedy just prior to the annual posting of the promotion list. I popped a Xanax and lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. In a few minutes, I started to mellow-out from my bout of extreme anxiousness. Thank God for the curative powers of drugs and good, common DS sensibility. I was saved from further humiliation, at least for the moment.

My CONEX had all the comforts of white trash trailer home. It had a private bathroom with a shower, a separate sink for washing up, cable TV and a DVD

player, a small fridge, a telephone, and an internet connection. I was set for the duration. I thanked Chuck for his help and unpacked my suitcase and opened the orange goodie bag; the small classified pouch. I was now home.

My compound was situated on five acres and roughly the same size as its identical twin across the street. It was also surrounded by a massive brick and stone wall with a top-guard of razor ribbon. This measure was intended to prevent climbers from breaching the perimeter—nearly everyone who lived inside its confines. Some weeks before, there was a tragic incident about a hundred yards outside the compounds at a busy traffic roundabout. A suicide bomber rammed an American military Humvee. At the point of impact, the bomber detonated his heavily-laden vehicle of explosives with devastating effect.

Two American soldiers were killed and one was seriously injured. Three Afghan civilians were killed and eighteen injured in the blast as well. The suicide bomber fortunately died and was greeted by those many virgins in Muslim heaven. The blast was so large it shook the CONEX containers and forced everyone to take shelter. Kabul was no place for the faint-of-heart; only for those avaricious contractors and neo-cowboys needing to make obscene amounts of money in a short time. It was also a perfect safe-haven for those ducking personal responsibility, reality, and a normal life back home.

I walked the compound from one end to the other. In addition to the CONEX box housing, it had a cafeteria, a snack bar, and a concessionaire selling liquor, cigarettes, condoms, toilet paper and life's other little necessities. The embassy's motor pool and fuel tanks were located at

one far corner. The U.S. Agency for International Development also had offices there. There was a volleyball court and a fitness center for those so inclined. Guard posts were located in towers at each corner, at the vehicle entrance, and at other spots. Security patrols of the compound were regular and frequent. I felt relatively safe and secure for someone in a war zone light-years away from home.

The whole place seemed to be well-guarded, but I wondered who guarded the guards? All of them were employed by Ajax. Who was watching over them? I'd meet the person the next day and his name was Tommy Thompson.

Sometimes those who served and protected pulled their security blankets so tightly over their heads they couldn't see the enemy in front of their eyes.

CHAPTER 5

ABOUT FACE TIME

I was met at the door by Irena Kommuniski. She was one of the assistant project managers for Ajax specializing in human resources. She was a Slav from one of the former Soviet bloc countries. She also was the sexiest woman on the embassy block and I was already smitten. I think that meant *tumescant* in Russian. Obviously, I needed to bone-up on my language skills.

I had spotted Irena the previous day working-out in the fitness center and had closely watched her on the treadmill. She was a beautiful young woman with brains who kept her body cut and toned to perfection. That was clever if you're looking for a wealthy husband or sugar daddy with a big package to satisfy your needs and desires. She didn't sweat, she glistened. Jesus, she sizzled. Her body moved to some unheard rhythm blaring

in her headphones. Mine moved to some unheard rhythm blaring in my jeans.

Irena introduced me to Tommy Thompson, Ajax's project manager for Afghanistan. As such, he was in charge of all personnel, contracts, tasks and operations throughout the country. Tommy was a Brit. I tried not to hold that fact of accidental birth against him. He was considered a mysterious character by most accounts; not unfriendly, just very quiet, unassuming and circumspect. In other words, Tommy was very reserved and proper as the British said. He'd retired some years prior from the Special Air Service, the elite military counter-terrorism arm of the UK's military.

Ajax recruited him for special operations it contracted with the governments of South Africa, Angola, and Sierra Leone to maintain law and order. That meant keeping the insurgents, freedom fighters, patriots, dissidents, rebels, and ordinary bandits away from their gold and diamond mines; the main sources of wealth for these countries. He'd been in Afghanistan for about eighteen months and was already an "old hand," as we said on the job.

In that time, he had gotten to know government officials, drug lords, warlords, and some Taliban leaders. Sometimes they were one and the same persons. He was wired by all counts and the embassy heavily relied on him and his company's operatives to feed it tactical intelligence from time to time. Given his tenure and connections, he was also tight with a number of embassy officials. He knew more about what was going on in the country than they did so he was a valuable asset to the embassy.

Irena served us strong coffee and a tray of biscuits. *She had been around Foreign Service officers long*

enough to learn their little quirks and desires and was one smart cookie—just like the Girl Scouts in short, pleated shirts, braids, white knee socks and Mary Jane’s who came around every year back home, I mused.

I briefed Tommy about the reason for my visit, but I sensed he already knew. I explained the department’s IG was looking at the security services contracts of all companies in Iraq and Afghanistan given the fact that they represented huge amounts of government monies and had not been competitively bid before award. The opportunity for waste, fraud and abuse was enormous under the circumstances. The department simply wanted to confirm that all was well so it could convince the Hill that it had done its due diligence. I assured him that Ajax was not being targeted in any sense. My orders were to conduct a cursory review of payroll records, copies of invoices, contract modifications or amendments, and other relevant documentation supporting the contract. I told him it was all very dull and boring scut work in my view.

I promised Tommy that I wouldn’t take up much of his time, but needed access to all contract records for the past six months. I asked for his full support and assistance in making my job easier so we could both get on with our lives. My nose grew about ten inches during our conversation. I also felt like I was preaching to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Tommy knew the score and knew I knew what he knew or should have known.

Sometimes you couldn’t bullshit a bull-shitter; especially those who also served and protected.

Tommy spent the next hour or so outlining Ajax’s missions and operations in Afghanistan. He first pointed

out that the U.S. embassy contract was one of several Ajax had in the country. Ajax also provided security services for United Nations personnel and those of various non-governmental organizations working in the hinterlands. He explained that the embassy contract had three separate task orders under one umbrella agreement.

The first order provided for the personal protection of the ambassador, the deputy chief of mission, and any visiting U.S. government officials. The second covered services to protect the two embassy compounds. It also provided for the running of protective security details for regular staff and visitors while they were traveling. The last task was the training and equipping the Afghan nationals who protected President Hamid Karzai. That task involved training the Afghan Presidential Protection Force, the APPF. The trainers also acted as mentors to the APPF to bring them up to a respectable and acceptable level of performance.

It was all very interesting and all known to me. I thanked Tommy for his time and asked him to put me in touch with his team leader for the Karzai operation. I needed to start my orientation somewhere. I much preferred the ring of the word *presidential* to *ambassadorial*. That's just me, but you need to excuse me since I'm a bit tone deaf. My next appointment was with the embassy's deputy chief of mission, more or less a courtesy call.

Sometimes those who served and protected had to tolerate protocol pretentiousness.

There had been an important change in the embassy pecking order since I retired. It was a good one, but the

Black Dragons screamed bloody murder. It overturned the natural order of things in their highly parochial wisdom. For decades, the regional security officer position reported to the administrative officer who, in turn, reported to the deputy chief of mission. The security, procurement, housing, contracting, budget and fiscal, personnel, general services, telecommunications, and medical support functions also reported to the administrative officer.

Former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, changed the batting order out of frustration with the system and the Dragons control of it. She moved the regional security officer, and all related operations and programs, out-from-under the administrative officer and assigned the supervisory function to the deputy chief of mission.

That resulted in two very positive things from the DS perspective. Firstly, it gave the RSO greater access to the front office and the senior decision makers. The admin officer could no longer spin security recommendations or threat assessments or influence the outcomes of employee malfeasance investigations since the RSO now sat at the same table with the big boys or girls during deliberations. Secondly, the decision recognized the fact that the scope of the RSO's operations and relationships with the host government had significantly evolved over the years. He or she now managed high-dollar programs with significant political impact, especially given the expanded role of antiterrorism training for foreign security and law enforcement officials.

Money, power, and influence had shifted to the RSO and often far-exceeded those of the administrative

officer. The department's undersecretary for management at the time made his displeasure known when he was forced to announce this change to the Foreign Service establishment. It was a distasteful departure from the norm. The deputy chiefs of mission weren't thrilled with the decision either. It meant one more performance appraisal to write each year. My close, personal buddy, Larry Bumpkiss, now wielded more political clout at post than many of his colleagues.

Ambrose M. Pierce III was the deputy chief of mission for the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. A deputy chief of mission, or DCM, was the number two guy or gal in the embassy organizational structure. He or she acted much like a CEO to the board chairman of a U.S. corporation. He or she was the mission's de facto chief of staff and reported directly to the ambassador. As such, the position exercised power. The power was mainly derived from the fact he or she wrote the annual performance appraisals for all senior direct reports. Keep in mind, the Foreign Service operated under an "up-or-out" system—career advancement was of critical importance. This control mechanism represented real clout in the government bureaucracy. Most importantly, he or she protected the backside of the ambassador and punished those who might be audacious or foolish enough to step out of line.

Ambrose Pierce had been at post for eight months and had a reputation as a tough taskmaster. He was married, but his wife sat safely at home since Kabul was an unaccompanied assignment. He was a Yale graduate who had earned two Meritorious Honor Awards during his career. He was a senior Foreign Service officer with the personal rank of minister-counselor.

I knew these things as gospel since I had looked them up in the department's biographical register—a.k.a. *stud book*. The book contained biographical sketches of all Foreign Service officers. Each entry contained the officers' name, date of birth, colleges attended with degrees awarded, date entered on duty, assignment history, promotion history and marital status. The stud book was a great reservoir and resource of personal data for curious colleagues and foreign spies.

Ambrose Pierce stood and shook my hand across his desk. I took a chair nearby. Ambrose was a short, stocky, white male in his early fifties. He had a round face with a perfectly shaped Poirot-style mustache. He was balding and had steel gray eyes and wore pince-nez glasses which he periodically removed for effect when trying to make a point. He was wearing a navy blue wool blazer with a pink Ralph Lauren shirt underneath and his cuffs were monogrammed with his initials. His perfunctory school tie was fitted with a Windsor knot and he looked the perfect gentleman, straight from the pages of an early issue of *GQ*.

I started the conversation with the word *sir* since I always used that word when groveling with my cap in hand. I told him I had been assigned by the IG to investigate allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse involving the security services contracts held by Ajax. I emphasized that these were only allegations as nothing had been proven yet. My role was essentially limited to a fact-finding mission to determine if a formal investigation and audit of Ajax's books were warranted under the circumstances.

I had this stuff down pat at this point. Besides being prim and proper statements, they were also flat-out lies. I

was here to identify the guilty and bring the perps to justice, but I didn't want to tip my hand with Ambrose or anyone else at post. I only reluctantly confided in Larry Bumpkiss as to the true scope of my mission. I believed he would keep my secret safe despite our differences. I wanted to be up-and-running before documentation went missing and memories got fuzzy.

Sometimes those who served and protected realized the incidence of Alzheimer's was exceedingly high among those under investigation.

We spoke for only ten minutes or so. He asked a few innocuous questions about my investigation and name dropped several senior DS officials who were close, personal friends in order to intimidate me. He said the embassy would fully cooperate with my inquiries as long as they didn't disrupt operations or the delicate sensitivities of the staff members. In other words, he told me not to make waves. This was how such things were conveyed between superiors and inferiors in the Foreign Service. He made it clear who was in charge around here and I'd better not step out of line. He wasn't cowed by me in the slightest and dismissed me with a quick, derisive wave of his hand. Needless to say, I didn't like the cut of his jib one bit.

Ambrose was not only an affront to sensible fashion, he was a Dragon. He was a dark gray one who aspired to be an ambassador somewhere, anywhere, before he ended his career. He was bright, strong, clever and cunning and would make a good adversary. I sharpened my lance later that night to a sharp point. I didn't know if he was guilty of anything except overweening pride and arrogance, but those attributes alone were good enough

for me to dislike him.

I walked to my room and freshened up before dinner. I poured myself a glass of wine and watched a few minutes of CNN before heading to the cafeteria. The cafeteria was decent sized, holding about forty people seated comfortably. I got in line at the hot table and looked at the specials on the menu: lamb stew, leg of lamb or lamb cutlets. I chose the lamb, a side of beets and a can of RC Cola and ordered my meal to go. I must have been a bit restless since I liked to eat my lamb on the lam. Depressed by the abundance and variety of menu selections, I sheepishly waddled back to my room. I mentally lambasted myself for my choice of food. Ok, I could have said chided instead, but I wasn't lamenting my feeble efforts to wordsmith one wit or bit.

I went to sleep fairly early, but later that night I awoke to the sounds of mortar shells or rockets. I wasn't sure which, because they sounded much the same when they exploded. The embassy and its next-door neighbor, the headquarters of the Multinational Force for Afghanistan, were frequent targets of Taliban displeasure with our foreign policy goals for Afghanistan. The bastards simply couldn't take a joke!

Of course, these weapons were notoriously inaccurate. They rarely hit their intended targets and usually fell harmlessly on Afghan schools or medical clinics some distance away. We were fairly well protected as the roofs of our CONEXes were piled high with sandbags, just in case the bad (or good) guys got lucky (or unlucky, as the case might be). How could misdirected shelling be called *friendly*? It must be an age-dependent thing since I never understood the punch line.

The RSO held frequent *duck and cover* drills, usually

early in the morning before the regular start of business. The drills were intended to familiarize us with the locations of our reinforced shelters. There, we would gather together to wait-out an attack. Misery truly does love company in such circumstances.

Posted on the back of each room door were concise instructions as what to do in the event of attack. In addition, each set of instructions depicted the nearest shelter and a diagram directing us to it. Some wiseass had penned a large mushroom cloud over my shelter. I didn't understand how people could joke about such things. Life was much too precious and important to be trivialized in such a manner. I guessed that some people had no sense of gallows humor.

We diligently practiced and perfected our responses to a mortar and/or rocket attack against the embassy compound. Once we heard the alarm announcing another drill, we'd immediately duck under our blankets and cover ourselves while waiting for the exercise to end.

Sometimes those who served and protected were much too sleepy, lazy, and stupid for their own damn good.

CHAPTER 6

A CASUAL WALKABOUT

I got up early and put on my cleanest leisure suit and dusted-off my wingtips. I wanted to click with the people I would be meeting later. I got a cup of Joe at the cafeteria and lit my fourth cigarette of the morning. I needed sustenance. I would be meeting Vince Young, Ajax's team leader for the Karzai training operation and his crew at the presidential palace. I still had plenty of time to kill and Afghanistan was a perfect place for such activity.

The palace was only about five blocks from the embassy and on the same street. Ordinarily, the drive would take about three minutes, but these days it took twenty minutes or so to get inside. One now had to contend with all the vehicle check-points and security inspections. I still had time for another cigarette.

I hitched a ride with an embassy motor pool driver who

dropped me outside the main entrance to the presidential compound. Walking the streets, even during the day, was highly discouraged. It had nothing to do with terrorism or the Taliban and everything to do with the lurching hordes of street urchins begging, polishing shoes, washing car windows, watching vehicles or selling trinkets to an unwary passerby.

These unwashed, uneducated, and unfed children would swarm around a person and beg for food or money or anything else of value. They'd sometimes go much further and distract the befuddled person and pick a pocket or grab a purse, briefcase, camera, or anything else not nailed down. They'd be gone in a flash with the cash or whatever they could get their grubby mitts on. The children were a common sight on the streets of Kabul and a huge embarrassment for the Afghan government. Clever pedestrians would throw virtually worthless Afghan coins into the street and watch the urchins play dodge-ball with the oncoming traffic in the ensuing scramble to scoop up the money. Some became very adept at the game, but others were less talented. It was all fair play and good sport here.

I was ushered into the team's modest standalone building located at the back of the compound. Vince Young was a thirty-nine year old ex-Army Special Forces operator who had joined Ajax and the Karzai operation about two years prior, quadrupling his Army pay overnight. He was thin and wiry and walked like a panther stalking its prey. He moved with methodical purpose and economy of scale and had the looks of someone who could be dangerous. He was also very intelligent and well-spoken and I envied his style and essence of danger—things that were not standard issue

for DS agents in my day. In short, he was squared away as the Army would say. In short, he had his shit together as I would say. I did my little soft-shoe thing explaining what I was up to. He wasn't overly impressed with my forthrightness and he told me so to my face; at least what little I had left at the time.

Vince began his briefing. Some information was old, but much of it was new to me. Regardless, I listened intently. This was interesting stuff, but I asked to him to start at square two. I already knew this was a State Department-funded operation. Still, he explained that the operation was entirely funded through DS's Antiterrorism Assistance Program in Washington. Ajax had the contract to train the Karzai protective detail.

The ATA funded, supported, aided, and facilitated the training of the security forces of those countries friendly to the U.S. government. Under the guise of training, it had even funded security details to protect the heads of state in Haiti and Liberia. It wasn't only about the United States fighting the war on terrorism. In these instances, DS agents worked hand-in-glove with their foreign counterparts to keep key allies alive and in power.

The Karzai training program had been in place for about three years. That was also how long the APPF had existed. Its force consisted of about two hundred seventy-five agents and security officers. Despite its name, the Afghan Presidential Protection Force provided security for the president, the king, high ranking government officials, and visiting foreign dignitaries. Functionally, it had features and responsibilities similar to the U.S. Secret Service and Diplomatic Security Service, but all rolled into one organization. Its people worked in plainclothes or uniform depending on circumstances. Its

tenuous existence, funding, and authority solely depended on the whims and largesse of the Afghan National Security Council.

Vince and his team had two primary functions under one combined mission. First, he oversaw the American operatives or trainers who were embedded with the APPF. These were specialists in explosive ordnance disposal, K-9 operations, VIP protection, mobile and fixed guarding, emergency medicine, vehicle fleet maintenance, intelligence, sharpshooting, counter-sniper fire, and physical security measures. There were about sixteen independent contractors working for Ajax on this side of the house.

The second function consisted of managing a formal training academy for APPF recruits. All candidates had to successfully complete an eight week training regimen blessed by DS's Antiterrorism Assistance Program. Twenty-two American and eight local contractors staffed the academy's operation located outside Kabul. The combined functions were costing the department (and American taxpayers) close to eighteen million dollars a year. I would tour both facilities and operations today.

The team's unofficial slogan was KKA or *Keep Karzai Alive*. He was the Bush administration's one bright spot in the region; one the then president could point to when things were not going so well in Iraq. Bush would proclaim that a freely and democratically elected president and constitutional government now governed the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. However, the word *Islamic* was often quietly dropped by the current administration in references to the nation. Unlike Bush, President Obama had kept Karzai at bay and at arm's length during his terms in office. In retrospect, it was

probably a wise choice on his part.

What the president didn't tell the public was that President Karzai tried his best to govern a dysfunctional and fractious country. It was a crazy quilt of warlords, drug lords, religious lords, tribal lords and Lord knows who else. Hamid Karzai had an impossible job and had quietly threatened to resign his office on more than one occasion out of sheer frustration. However, he was dissuaded by two very determined U.S. ambassadors and one very anxious U.S. president. He wasn't called the Mayor of Kabul for nothing.

As Vince was talking, I noticed a box of matchbooks on the table. As a smoker, I understood their importance. As a former DS director of investigations, I understood their significance in fighting terrorism. The Diplomatic Security Service managed the U.S. government's Rewards for Terrorist Information Program. It was established in 1979 to offer monetary rewards to those persons providing information as to the whereabouts of wanted fugitives. Such informants might score a green card too if the information was particularly actionable. Of course, these were serious terrorists who kidnapped, killed, and maimed U.S. citizens abroad through acts of so-called political violence. These were very bad actors that were wanted by our government to stand trial for horrific crimes, if captured alive. In the end, it didn't make any difference though. They were still wanted, dead or alive.

Special Agent Brad Smith worked in DS's Protective Intelligence Division at headquarters. In 1989, he came up with a novel idea to track down the bad guys. He correctly reasoned that much of the Arab world smoked. He knew that the ubiquitous matchbook was a necessary

tool to do so. Why not publicize the Rewards Program by putting the terrorist's likeness and bio data on matchbook covers distributed freely by the United States abroad? He sold the idea to me and my seniors and went to work to implement it. He and his colleagues started by targeting the top terrorists on the list. Their work would pay off handsomely more than once.

Those countries believed to be harboring terrorists were initially targeted, but the initiative was expanded to other countries over time. The campaign was designed to get the message to the local populace that Uncle Sam would pay big bucks to anyone providing information as to the whereabouts of one of the terrorists on the Rewards Program hit list. Matchbooks, each with the likeness or photo of a wanted terrorist on the cover, were flooded throughout these countries.

In Arabic and other languages, the matchbooks would explain how a person could earn extra money in their spare time by reporting certain information to the closest U.S. embassy or consulate. If the information turned out to be credible and useful, a bundle of green would be discreetly deposited into the person's bank account anywhere in the world. Simple *quid pro quo*—if the snitches lived to spend it.

One payoff would be Mir Aimal Kasi who was responsible for the attack on CIA employees arriving at work on January 25, 1983 at their offices in Langley, Virginia. Kasi patiently waited at the main entrance to the facility with an AK-47 automatic rifle hidden under his trench coat. He calmly walked up to several cars waiting in line to be admitted and opened fire. Two male CIA employees were killed and three wounded in the attack. Kasi fled the scene and then the States. He later would

comment that he could never kill a woman because his religious tenants strictly forbade him to do so.

In May 1997, an informant, having read a matchbook cover and its offer of riches, walked into the U.S. consulate in Karachi, Pakistan. He claimed he could help lead the United States to Kasi. As proof, he showed a copy of a driver's license application made by Kasi under a false name, but bearing his photo. Apparently, the Pathan tribal elders who had been sheltering him were now prepared to do a deal in return for the multimillion dollar bounty on his head. Kasi was in the Afghan border regions, so the informant was told to lure him into Pakistan where he could more easily be apprehended. The U.S. government had just found a willing Judas goat.

Kasi was tempted with a lucrative business offer: smuggling Russian electronic goods into Pakistan. That hook brought him to Dera Ghazi Khan, a small city in the Punjab, where he checked into the Shalimar Hotel. At 4:00 am on the morning of June 15th, an armed team of FBI agents, aided by Pakistani ISI agents, raided Kasi's hotel room. His fingerprints were taken on the scene, confirming his true identity. Kasi was then transported to a disputed location. U.S. authorities claimed it was a holding facility run by Pakistani authorities. The Pakistani's claimed it was the U.S. embassy in Islamabad.

Kasi was flown to the United States on June 17th aboard a C-141 transport. During the flight, he made a full oral and written confession. Kasi's extrajudicial rendition was controversial in Pakistan as no formal request for his extradition was made to the government of Pakistan. Moreover, no extradition proceedings were ever initiated in the nation's judicial system. U.S.

authorities would later assert that the extradition was wholly legal under an extradition treaty signed between the U.S. and United Kingdom back when Pakistan was under colonial rule.

Our American courts had no problem with this imaginative interpretation of the law. Kasi was found guilty of capital murder and executed by lethal injection in 2002. Hopefully, he was now with many virgins fitted with impregnable chastity belts.

Sometimes those who protected and served did make perfect matches in heaven.

While reminiscing about my remembrances, Vince finished his briefing and we then toured the presidential compound. It was approximately forty-five acres in size. Its perimeter was surrounded by high walls and fixed guard posts. It housed the offices of the president, his official residence, offices and barracks of the APPF, and the king's residence and associated offices. The king had no governmental authorities or powers. He merely carried out honorary, ceremonial functions for his country now. The Kingdom of Afghanistan was abolished in 1973 following a *coup d'état* when his majesty, the king of Afghanistan, Muhammed Zâhir Shah was traveling abroad.

The king lived in exile in Rome until his permanent return to his homeland in 2002. King Zahir Shah acceded to the throne in 1933 upon the assassination of his father, Nahir Shah. Zahir Shah was respected by the Afghan people and served as a stabilizing, but insignificant unifying figure in the country. His health was poor and he wasn't expected to live much longer and he frequently visited Dubai for medical treatment. The death of this

popular figurehead would be mourned, but would not impact the government's leadership succession one iota. The stability of the nation, or lack thereof, was not at stake by his passing.

We toured the grounds and reviewed the APPF barracks, the mess hall, the motor pool, the armory, the medical unit, the physical training facilities and the football, sorry soccer fields. I was then introduced to the *Engineer*. Abdullah bin Abdullah was the commander of the Afghan Presidential Protection Force. He had been snatched from obscurity some years before because of his loyalty to the Karzai regime. He was a civil engineer by education, training and vocation, until now. He had absolutely no experience in managing a large organization of any type. His unswerving loyalty to President Karzai was his only qualification and claim to fame. That was all that was needed these days since one could not distinguish a Taliban player or sympathizer without a scorecard. There was a constant worry about the APPF being infiltrated by the opposing side.

President Hamid Karzai was a fascinating person; even more so because of his relationship with the United States. He was an ethnic Pathan born in Kandahar, Afghanistan and came from a family who strongly supported King Zahir Shah. He earned a post graduate degree in political science in India. In 1983, he returned to Afghanistan to work as a fundraiser for the anti-Soviet Mujahideen. After the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992, he served as a deputy foreign minister in the new government. When the Taliban emerged in the 1990s, Karzai was initially among its supporters; however, like many other loyalists, he eventually broke with the Taliban, citing distrust of its

links to Pakistan. After the Taliban drove out the newly formed government in 1996, he lived in exile in Quetta, Pakistan where he worked to reinstate King Zahir Shah. His father was assassinated during that time, presumably by the Taliban. He swore revenge against the Taliban by working to overthrow them. He made good on his promise and was elected the president of Afghanistan in 2004.

In 2005, an attempt was made on Karzai's life while visiting Kandahar. A gunman wearing a newly minted uniform of the APPF opened fire, wounding the Governor of Kandahar and an American special operations officer assigned to the security detail. The gunman, one of the President's bodyguards, and a bystander were killed when APPF agents opened fire on the assailant. The president continued to be a favorite target of the radical fundamentalists and needed all the protection he could muster to keep him alive.

In late 2004, Karzai rejected a U.S. proposal to end poppy production in Afghanistan through the aerial spraying of chemicals on the crops. He feared it would harm the economic situation of his fellow Pathans in the southern tribal regions. Moreover, Karzai's younger brother was rumored to be involved in the drug trade. He had financed Karzai's presidential campaign. The situation was particularly delicate since he and his administration were not financially or politically equipped to influence reforms outside the capital of Kabul. Other regions, particularly the remote ones, had been under the influence of various local leaders for generations. Karzai had been wooing them for the benefit of the whole country with relatively little success. However, he never aggressively challenged them for fear of a full blow civil

war.

It was almost lunch time. I was ravenous and looked forward to the noontime meal at the DS training academy located some thirty clicks outside Kabul. We said *clicks*, not kilometers, overseas. We got more testosterone fueled mileage out of the word that way.

Sometimes those who served and protected often slipped and said *mikes* for miles, but the conversion tables drove us crazy.

The nine of us saddled up and rode in three lightly armored Toyota Land Cruisers. They wouldn't protect us from high-order, improvised explosive devices, but would prevent small-arms fire and some shrapnel penetrating the skins of the vehicles. We did not want to be stranded under any circumstances and, if need be, we would abandon a vehicle and worry about it later. We also wanted some firepower if we couldn't evade an attack on our stunted motorcade.

Naturally, I rode shotgun in the second vehicle and I was well-protected from hostile fire. I wasn't so sure about *friendly* fire though. I wore my soft body armor and carried my shotgun. Truth be told, I looked dressed to kill. The ride was fairly scenic and totally uneventful and we pushed our way through lesser traffic with ease. We largely avoided the potholes and rubble in the roads by taking a short-cut through the grounds of the international airport. That move not only saved us a few minutes time, it bought us additional protection as the facility was heavily guarded. We arrived safely and on time, just as lunch was being served to those who protected and served themselves.

John Teeter was the academy commander, usually just referred to as “the camp,” but not in the presence of APPF recruits. Perhaps it was too campy even for DS, I guessed. He gave us his brief over lunch. The academy had been operating for almost three years. In that time, they had trained and qualified over three hundred recruits in basic firearms techniques, VIP protection measures, high speed and evasive driving maneuvers, hand-to-hand combat scenarios, first responder medical procedures, some basic fire safety techniques, and a lot of physical fitness. Each class consisted of about thirty students. There was both classroom and practical instruction on how to protect themselves and their principal. John mentioned that the washout rate was about ten percent for each class. These men left of their own volition or at the instructor’s polite request.

The training was strict and intense, consisting of early morning PT, followed by breakfast, followed by classroom instruction, followed by lunch, followed by practical demonstrations, followed by firearms re-qualifications with the standard-issue AK-47 and Glock pistol, followed by more PT, followed by dinner, followed by homework, followed by complete exhaustion and sleep. Time was always allowed throughout the day for prayers though. We might be agnostically inclined in DS, but we always respected the primitive and misguided religious beliefs of others. Actually, *agnostic* was the proper word. That was an atheist without balls, as we all knew.

John finished his brief and I had finished my lunch. I correctly closed my plate by placing my utensils precisely at the four o’clock position as we had been taught in the Miss Manners segment of our agent training course. The

Indian waiter looked at me and pleasantly asked if I had finished and could remove the plate. I hated it when the ignorant and unwashed of this world were exceedingly efficient and polite. I'd lick my psychic wounds and fingers later when no one was watching.

We walked around the compound afterwards. We saw the student CONEX boxes, the staff CONEX boxes, the classroom CONEX boxes, the office CONEX boxes, the latrine CONEX boxes, and the weight room and arms room CONEX boxes. We had already seen the chow hall CONEX boxes and I declined an invitation to return. We visited the bar and swimming pool, looked at the generators and the various physical security measures to protect the camp. OK, DS finally had me boxed-in. It simply couldn't tolerate those agents who thought outside the organization.

After the guided tour, John suggested a ride to the top of a nearby hill that provided an impressive 360 degree view of the surrounding countryside. I agreed and we rode all-terrain vehicles to the top of the hill and parked below its summit. The camp had established a 24/7 guard post atop because the insurgents had thoughtlessly fired rockets and mortars into the camp. Things had been quiet since. However, this was a standard DS security maneuver. We would take a hill, but then give it up because of a lack of sufficient funding. In truth, the green visor men, and their bean-counter conspirators, really ran the department under the watchful eyes of the Dragons.

John was right; the view was spectacular. The sun was beginning to set, I think in the west, but I wasn't sure given the nine hour time difference between the United States and Afghanistan. I had him take several photos of

me in my vest holding the shotgun. This was too good an opportunity to pass up. I would download the photos on my laptop and send them to both my kids. I thought they would be proud of their old man since they'd never seen me in mufti before, only *in flagrante delicto*. They might be pleased by the change.

One could see for miles and miles in every direction. It was one enormous expanse of light brown, sandy, dun-colored landscape. In one valley, I could make out an enormous graveyard of Soviet military equipment. Destroyed tanks, trucks, rocket launcher platforms, artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers and all manner of military ordnance had been collected and deposited in this spot. Acres upon acres of war materiel had been left to slowly rust in the arid climate. I believed it was a fitting tribute to Soviet arrogance and its godless, ambitious foreign policy in Afghanistan. Importantly, there was probably still enough space to accommodate American war materiel as well.

Manifest destiny was a uniquely American experience. It was ours and ours alone. To borrow the concept, someone must first get our permission and agree to the payment of royalties. It was the only proper course of action in such matters. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," I exultantly yelled to the wind. In retrospect, maybe I should've used a more manly declaration to express my displeasure. But those listening still got my wimpy message loud and clear. I prayed to God that these grotesque instruments of war would find better use in the future. Perhaps they could be recycled into ashtrays by enterprising Afghan craftsmen to sell to the tourists.

The scenery really was an incredible sight to behold so I took a couple of snapshots with my camera. God or

Allah, I felt totally alive and invigorated by the sights. I was a free bird flying free in a not-so free land. I gazed over this vast domain once more before pulling myself away from its breathtaking vista. I was on top of the world and someone to be reckoned with. *I was Avery of Afghanistan*, I fuzzily thought. At least the alliteration was OK.

Ecce homo, you lesser planetary beings! Of course, I might just be delirious, suffering from cerebral hypoxia, but I didn't give a damn at the moment. Regardless, I felt absolutely fantastic and attuned to the wonders of the universe. I didn't quite understand any of them, but I still felt full of myself. It then dawned on me that I'd forgotten to take my lithium carbonate today. Oh well, so much for the manic bravado. It must have been that time difference thing acting up again.

Sometimes those who served and protected were never too full of themselves or their psychotropic medications.

We motored back to town and as they dropped me at the embassy, I asked Vince to snag me a signed photograph of President Karzai. A thoughtful note to his good friend Avery Dick would be an especially nice touch. I asked Vince to politely tell the president not to use indelible ink so I could easily correct any spelling errors. I was a hellion when it came to English grammatical details, especially with uppity, illiterate foreigners. It'd be a keepsake I actually might keep. It could have some intrinsic or, more importantly, monetary value someday. However, that would likely only happen after the guy died. That bit of historic memorabilia just might sell for a pretty penny if that were to happen. But I

would never accept Afghanis for payment. That would be much too risky given the tenuous state of the war and the future of the country.

Sometimes those who served and protected tried to short the markets in war-torn countries like Afghanistan.

CHAPTER 7

AVERY'S DAY OFF

I slept late because I'd been working my butt off for the past few weeks and it was time for a break from reality.

I badly needed to do some sightseeing. That was reason enough for a typical Foreign Service officer, but never a DS agent. Therefore, I would wear my Foreign Service persona today. We were well-trained in the arts of disguises, costumes, and cross-dressing. I got dressed, crossed myself, and strapped my fanny pack over my stomach.

I filled it with my room key, embassy ID card, passport, money, and my Smith Sixty. I then grabbed a cup of Joe at the cafeteria. Coffee was called *Joe* here. There was no room for wimpy things or people in a war zone. Next, I

gamely strutted my stuff to the motor pool that was located just behind the cafeteria, all the while walking proud and erect as an American should.

The Foreign Service national staff, or Afghan employees, or more commonly the *locals*, served as the backbone of the embassy infrastructure. Most spoke passable English. Many spoke fluent English and several other languages as well. They typically possessed more language skills than many Foreign Service officers they worked for. More importantly, they performed invaluable work on behalf of the U.S. government. Among other things, they provided vital administrative and logistical support to the embassy. That often required subtle, sophisticated negotiating with their countrymen for our benefit.

They also provided important continuity during the frequent turnovers of the Foreign Service officers and acted as translators, interpreters and guides for their American masters. Sometimes they were injured and killed performing their duties on behalf of the United States. Often it was simply a matter of being caught in the wrong spot at the wrong time. In the Foreign Service, the good ones were highly-coveted colleagues and respected resources. Sometimes they ended up as lifelong friends too.

On rare occasions, you'd run across a local employee who was an officious, arrogant prick. Invariably, these turned out to be men who were brought up in male-influenced and male-dominated cultures. The embassy's General Services Office had one of these characters—Barbrak Kamal. It wasn't only the Americans who disliked him. His Afghan coworkers probably used less charitable words to describe his demeanor. Well, in point of fact,

they hated his freaking guts.

Like virtually all Afghans, Barbrak was a devout Muslim who visited one of the empty offices or conference rooms in the building several times a day. There, he would spread out his small prayer rug on the floor. He would kneel, face toward Mecca, and pray as a sign of his sincere devotion to Mohammed, Allah, and the teachings of Islam. However, aside from being arrogant and officious, Barbrak was not particularly quick on the uptake. He was downright stupid about most things, but he had a knack for keeping the expendable supply room fully stocked with needed items. It also didn't hurt that his brother was a very senior official in Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense; the reason that Barbrak got hired in the first place. And yes, cronyism did raise its ugly head from time to time. But it was explained away as simply facilitating U.S. national security interests abroad. I was sure that his colleagues appreciated this wholly logical and sophistic argument.

Over a period of several weeks, his coworkers convinced him that he was actually facing the wrong direction while praying. They did this by doctoring maps on their computers and discreetly dropping copies on his desk. They would all point in the same direction when asked which way Mecca laid. He was skeptical at first, but the evidence continued to mount and it seemed to be overwhelming. In his presence, colleagues would stare out the window and lovingly gaze in the direction of the new Mecca.

With the preponderance of evidence, it finally dawned on Barbrak that he'd been facing the wrong direction for his entire life. He panicked and turned his prayer rug around ninety degrees and pleaded with Allah for

forgiveness. I was sure his prayers were answered, but he was now praying five times a day to the Norse gods in Scandinavia over the North Pole.

Sometimes those who served and protected possessed moral compasses that others didn't share.

Ahmed Challowby was a Foreign Service national working as an embassy motor pool driver. He had returned to Afghanistan following the routing of the Taliban to help his people recover from years of Soviet, Taliban, and American rule. He spoke pretty good English for a '79 Dartmouth grad. He also spoke Arabic, Pashto, and Farsi. He held a genuine green card so he could easily move back and forth between his native country and his adopted one.

I hired Ahmed on the side and off the embassy's books because I was required to follow the embassy's strict rules for travel off the compounds. That meant I would have to travel in an armored Suburban with a gaggle of heavily armed security guards trailing my every move. I opted to ignore the rules, so I could keep a low profile. That was a critical security precaution in high-terrorist threat environments.

One wanted to blend into the local populace and not draw unwanted attention to yourself, especially if you are an American in Kabul. We left the embassy in a black Chevy Suburban displaying diplomatic tags and a small flag stanchion affixed to the left front fender. I sat in the front passenger seat like a normal human being.

I told Ahmed that I really needed some good-old, American food. I'd been away from home for several weeks now and I was tired of the local cuisine; something called lamb. Bah! He suggested a restaurant in

Chinatown in central Kabul. I agreed and we parked the Suburban close to the restaurant. I gave a couple of cigarettes to one of the street kids to watch the vehicle. One could never be too careful or health conscious these days. The Taliban were renowned for placing improvised explosive devices in the wheel-wells of vehicles they didn't like. Don't worry about a few measly carcinogens in the smokes here. Life expectancy was low. This was Marlboro country, cowpokes.

I looked up and down the street to trying to detect anything threatening or unusual. I saw several things that bothered me. There were open sewers and uncollected garbage rotting under the hot sun. But what worried me the most was the absence of street dogs since I had seen plenty of them elsewhere in the city. These scrawny creatures barely survived on scraps of discarded gristle, bone, and the unwanted entrails of slaughtered animals. Truth be told, it was just plain offal. But where were the dogs in Chinatown? Not even a Pekinese could be found wandering about. Somehow that fact dogged me and nagged at the back of mind. But no worries, I was famished and looked forward to my meal. My canines ached to chomp down on some delectable food, despite my worries.

Ahmed and I found a table at the far rear of the restaurant. I customarily sat with my back to the wall. Good tradecraft was never ignored or forgotten. It was also the closest spot to the bathroom. We both ordered the specials of the day, wonton lamb and collard greens. We both washed it down with RC Colas. We finished our meals and asked for the check. I suggested we go *Dutch* out of respect for Ahmed's developed sense of American hospitality and he hesitantly agreed. I left a pack of

unopened Juicy Fruit gum as a tip.

Sometimes those who served and protected were big promoters of U.S. products and values overseas.

Next was a visit to the souk, the main open-air market of Kabul. I was looking forward to mixing and haggling with the locals. Everything in Afghanistan could be found here for the right price, or so I was told. There were people and animals, both living and dead, everywhere in sight. Dissected, naked chickens were hanging next to boxes of aged Christmas cards. These sat next to live capuchin monkeys dancing on short ropes for the amusement of the onlookers.

The whole place smelled of spices, butchered livestock, and the stench of disgusting trash. I deeply breathed it all in. The aroma was strangely powerful and, at times, overwhelming. This was one of the reasons I joined the Foreign Service. I wanted to see the world, to experience different and exotic cultures, and to revel in the mysteries and diversities of life. I also liked the cheap booze and cigarettes overseas—not to mention the easy women.

On our disappointed rounds, I bought a brass ashtray hammered out of an old, discarded Soviet artillery shell. I thought earlier that turning swords into plowshares was a great idea. And now those Afghans with enough brass were doing it. The ashtray would be a great conversation piece with my DS colleagues. I could prove to them that I hadn't given up smoking. I skillfully haggled down the price and happily moved onto the next stall. I knew it wasn't exactly kosher, but old habits were hard to break. Ahmed and I continued my shopping for the next two hours.

I noticed that Ahmed didn't buy anything and asked why. I was shocked when he told me that he needed his money for food for his wife and eleven children. I reminded him of the Planned Parenthood course the embassy offered every two weeks to its employees and their spouses. All he had to do was schedule the appointments. There were even special makeup sessions for those wives who missed their periods. Of course, those would be during the Lamaze classes.

We turned a corner and that was when I spotted Fred. It was love at first sight. Fred was a noble, peregrine falcon, a bird who would soon have a new noble name—Fred it would be. By the way, I was an avid aficionado of all things aviary and Avery. I didn't even glance at the many other birds on display because most lived like filthy, caged animals. The pigeons were an especially sullen bunch. The surly homies and stools eyed me warily. When they thought I wasn't watching, they'd crane their necks and flex their wings to show off their gray and white gang tats. I wasn't impressed in the slightest.

They'd intimidate and shake down the parakeets and other songbirds. The parrots were the nastiest, though. They wouldn't let another bird get a word in edgewise. This gag and gang ruled the roost. The leader of the posse was an old, wizened peacock surrounded by a gaggle of young chicks. He not only ruled the flocks, but ran all the multicolored birds in the joint.

But for me, it was Fred and he alone. I only had eyes for him. The falconry fad had been around the Middle East and Central Asia before the time of Christ. Shrewd Afghan traders feathered their own nests by breeding, training, and selling the birds to wealthy Bedouins who would pay top dollar. To make sure Fred was, in fact, a

male, I asked the shopkeeper to spread his wings and then his legs. He was a male all right and he had a big set, just like his future owner.

I had plans for Fred. One was to tether him to the clothesline behind my room where he'd guard my backside by alerting me to any wannabe intruders. It was a well known fact that conventional security alarms were notoriously prone to false alerts. It was what Sherlock Holmes famously said in the 1944 film *The Pearl of Death*: "Electricity is the high priest of false security." So I guessed I was a dyed-in-the wool Luddite at heart.

Sometimes those who served and protected were technically disinclined towards technology.

Fred's wants would be few. His tether would be just long enough to swoop down on hapless stray cats that were nervy enough to slink by. Those weren't his only value-added benefits. I had more in mind for Fred. I'd find him a good home when his services were no longer useful to my plan. Just perhaps, I'd donate him to the embassy's Marine security guard detachment. The globe and eagle were strong symbols of Marine Corps power and pride. A falcon was pretty close in my birder book. We haggled over Fred's worth and I finally relented and paid the piper his price.

My arms were tired from carrying the heavy ashtray, so I allowed Ahmed to carry Fred. The shopkeeper had hooded Fred's head, wrapped a piece of leather around Ahmed's forearm and tied the package in place. We walked on, bumping and jostling our way through the crowds. Ahmed was careful to hold my magnificent bird straight in front of him lest he get pecked. I laughed as he resembled a Hitler Youth marching past his Fuhrer during

the anniversary parade of *Kristalnacht*.

Our last stop was the rug section of the souk, the reason I came here in the first place. The dealers had the very finest quality Afghan rugs, and some Iranian ones, on sale. I was in heaven. I couldn't believe the selection of *chobi*, *Baluch*, and *sherwan* carpets. I didn't bother looking at the Iranian rugs because I'd never buy one. I still remembered when the bastards had stormed our embassy in Tehran in 1979 and kept our diplomats hostage for 444 days. The event had been seared into my mind and those of other Americans at the time.

I recalled how the Revolutionary Guard had conscripted the finest weavers in the country to reconstruct hastily and poorly shredded classified documents owned by the embassy's station. The weavers had meticulously pieced together a number of highly sensitive documents containing the identities of covert CIA agents and operatives in the country. Those Iranians paid a terrible price for their well-intentioned nationalism and/or greed.

I thought the Pentagon should have carpet bombed the motherfuckers back to the Stone Age when we had the chance. Where was General Curtis Le May when you really needed him? The act was the equivalent of the State Department sending a formal protest note to the nation's foreign ministry stating in no uncertain terms how affronted and displeased the U.S. government was with its unseemly conduct. In the department, we took tough stands and backed-off as we had to.

I spent nearly an hour looking at the rugs. Each was magnificent in its own right but I finally settled on a nine-by-twelve foot *chobi*. It would look great on the hardwood floors in my living room back home. I could properly and

legally ship it home free through the embassy mail system. I would use it as wrapping material to cushion my Smith Sixty when I pouched it home at the end of my stay. It was important to respect and protect U.S. government property. It was also a matter of setting the right example for others.

Sometimes those who served and protected were not very frugal with other people's money.

Ahmed and I had finished our shopping, or at least I had. I tipped Ahmed with a pack of Marlboros and heartily wished my new friend *salud*. There was still plenty of sun and time left in the day so I secured Fred and went to the pool—the embassy swimming one, not the motor one. I sat on one of the chaises lounges and immediately noticed Irena Kommuniski sitting about ten yards away wearing a skimpy, French-cut, two-piece swimsuit. I was wearing an old pair of boxers since I had forgotten to pack my trunks. I didn't notice anyone else at the pool. She quickly acknowledged my presence by giving me a big smile.

Irena then dropped to the concrete deck and did five quick pushups. These were followed by fifteen slow and highly accentuated squat thrusts in my direction. I really admired this young woman's form. I eventually tired of Irena oiling her gorgeous body from head to foot, pausing suggestively at her breasts and upper thighs. She made me think of the fried chicken served last night at the cafeteria: hot, greasy, spoiled, and totally tasteless. She was likely a chick that needed to be boned before eaten. However, before I left, I said goodbye to her. I gingerly walked from the pool with my towel tightly tied around my waist. There was no reason for her to see my ardor; at

least I thought that was the word one applied to these awkward situations.

Sometimes those who served and protected should be embarrassingly humble, modest, and limp in the presence of foreigners.

I went directly to my room since I was bushed—correction, I meant I was tired. It had been a long day of lunch and shopping. Like my colleagues, I'd developed several techniques to conserve my energy on the job. I never could seem to apply those same things to my personal time.

In DS, we had cut our teeth as young agents by conducting background investigations of applicants to the department. These were done for employment and security clearance purposes. The Washington Field Office caseload was brutal in those days and we had quotas to meet, always running to catch up. Our overseer's strident drumbeat for ever-greater production forced us to take shortcuts because he kept increasing the tempo by insisting on more case-closures. Conducting interviews over-the-phone, instead of in-person, became commonplace. However, the incessant, never-ending beat for more of the same never ended. We risked being drummed out of DS if our production numbers fell too low.

To get a breather, we would condense a source interview with a coworker or neighbor or reference to its bare-bone essentials. We would simply ask two questions: "Did the interviewee have any knowledge to suggest the applicant was not a loyal American and member of the Republican Party?" and "Was the applicant a dues paying member of NAMBLA, the North

American Man/Boy Love Association?”

That was all we asked—relevant, concise questions. It made the job a lot easier while still weeding out perverted, disloyal citizens looking to sup at Mother State’s bountiful table. No queers, pinkos, or pedophiles could be seated in those days. But nowadays, things are done on a first-come, first-served basis with open-seating for all. Just grab a chair folks and belly-up to the table.

Many interviewees were at a loss for words under our direct questioning. That was good for our overly abbreviated reporting system. Of course, we had to give the obligatory warning. They were advised that anything they might say could be used against them in a court of law in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1974.

Our reports were very concise and usually boiled down to one of three succinct statements: “Get off my porch you dumb fucker or I’m calling the cops,” “No, I won’t watch while you’re doing your wife,” and “You’re in the wrong county, jackass.”

Don’t be too quick to judge our investigative acumen. We were severely constrained by the federal government’s Paperwork Reduction Act of 1969. We also didn’t want to incur any personal liability by denying security clearance and employment to undesirable candidates. The risk of being slapped with a lawsuit was too great. We diligently followed the department’s standard line of least resistance and increased our completed case numbers accordingly.

Back in my room, I showered and then turned on the TV to catch the BBC news. I needed to unwind from my shopping trip. I poured myself a glass of wine from the box in the fridge. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught

some movement in my bed. It was ever-so-slight, but I clearly saw it. The comforter had twitched and rippled and I immediately knew what it was. I'd experienced such things a couple of times during my time overseas. Using a sharp Occam's razor, I suspected that a rat or a mouse had gotten into my room to escape the chilly Kabul evenings. I was actually pretty good at correctly deducing such things.

I gingerly lifted the comforter to expose a snake, a large, nasty looking snake: a highly venomous asp! They were the worst and especially deadly for those people with pronounced lisps who needed to urgently yell for help.

With the butt of my shotgun, I ruthlessly beat the crap out of the snake and realized that guns really do kill. My many long years of terrorism training and on-the-job experience had finally come in handy. I eventually picked up the thing with the barrel of my shotgun, carried it ever so carefully down the path and deposited it in the nearest trash container. I did the same with my sheets and comforter. I left a note in plain English for the Afghan trash collectors warning them to be careful opening the container's lid since the snake might have survived the beating. It might be a little rambunctious as a result.

In Afghanistan, nothing went to waste these days. The garbage men would sell the snake's skin to the souk's craftsmen. These artisans would skillfully create beautiful billfolds and key chains to keep up with the market demands of their countrymen. The collectors would feed its meat to their desperately hungry children who lacked protein and fiber. They would then sell its venom glands to apothecaries who would turn them into aphrodisiacs for limp and hopeful Afghan eunuchs. At that moment, I

was terribly proud to be an American. I was always thoughtful and considerate of the feelings of others too. Regrettably, my handwriting was mostly illegible.

I searched my room from top to bottom looking for any evidence of other critters or other friendly gifts of a lethal nature. I found none, the place was clean—well sort of. But I was now concerned about life-and-death matters rather than cleanliness; despite the fact it was next to godliness. *Who would put an asp in my bed to kill me or scare me off the case?* I wondered.

This was very serious stuff. It was the attempted murder of a federal official on official, federal business, assigned to an official U.S. government facility, officially dealing with overly officious people. Things didn't get much worse in the game of snake or mouse.

Those responsible for the reprehensible and dastardly deed would pay dearly. I was honor bound not to say I was going to "find the sleazy fucks that did this, cut off their balls and shove them down their miserable throats until they choked to death." There was no place for such vulgar language in proper diplomatic discourse.

Sometimes those who served and protected were much too prissy and polite for their own good.

CHAPTER 8

SHARPENING THE TERRIBLE, SWIFT SWORD

I didn't like the little snake routine because it was a rude, crude and cruel act of intimidation. Its untimely death was also contrary to the spirit of the ASPCA. I knew who arranged this little caper—Mr. Tommy Thompson. His guilt was as plain as the nose on his face. Well, in fairness, it wasn't his nose I was picking on. I found him guilty by virtue of his facial tics and his smarmy British accent. As an American, I detested foreigners who spoke better English than I did.

However, I vowed that I would hoist him by his own

petard, meaning I would thrust my lance into his guts and watch him squirm while he screamed in terrible agony. I would not listen to his abject pleas for mercy. It was obvious that I was a tad bit out of sorts as we said in the Foreign Service. That was the rough equivalent of anyone else saying that they were totally pissed; sorry, I meant miffed. As an offensive guy, I didn't like to be on the defensive. I liked to seize the initiative and screw other people over first. Tommy was going to pay a very big price for his ill-considered misdeed. Payback wasn't a bitch, it was an angry Dick.

I kept a close eye on Tommy; what we called *close quarters* surveillance in the biz. A little before eight o'clock one night, I noticed him leaving his CONEX wearing a black burka. I was immediately suspicious since the blue ones were much more popular on the compound. I discreetly followed him through the tunnel to the other side. He walked straight to one of the staff apartment buildings and went inside. I snuck in through the door and saw him enter the building's recreation room and I did the same. It turned out to be the weekly embassy AA meeting. Main State had several chapters and I had attended meetings there off-and-on over the years. So it was no big surprise that there would a chapter in Kabul.

Tommy sat in the first row of chairs and I sat in the back. The fifteen or so people in the room were also wearing burkas, mostly blue, but there were a few black ones as well. They also wore niqabs, the traditional Arab face covers. I was the only person not wearing a costume. I didn't have proper attire for the occasion. As a Foreign Service officer, I was thoroughly chagrined. I later learned the burkas and niqabs were worn to protect the identities of the attendees. The embassy was fairly small and

people knew each other. This chapter took privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality quite seriously. I decided to stay despite my deep embarrassment.

The next thirty minutes consisted of stories of addiction, sorrow, and remorse: of marriages and careers ruined, of recurring bouts of depression, self doubt, and searing thoughts of suicide. I'd heard it all before: simply a different time and place for such recriminations. These poor souls clung to the flimsy hope that they could overcome their addiction and lead happy, normal lives free of self-destructive behavior—lives free of pain and anguish.

When it came to my turn, I stood, cleared my throat, and clearly announced the obvious. "I'm Avery and I'm an ASSHOLE!" My voice quavered when I spoke the word.

The group came back with an enthusiastic "Hi Avery." I felt the sincerity and warmth in their voices and I gave a little wave of my hand in appreciation.

"I've been an asshole most of my life, not a complete one, but an asshole nonetheless. My problem started almost immediately after joining the department. I found my colleagues and coworkers constantly joking, punning, pimping, and laughing at the inner workings of the foreign affairs establishment. The most tragic world events, along with the State Department's equally tragic responses, would bring tears of laughter to their eyes. The offensive wordplay never stopped and it was excruciating. I couldn't avoid hearing the incessant Polack jokes and the little sexist, racist, and ethnic slurs, and double entendres. I eventually picked up the nasty habit and it's been downhill ever since. May God forgive me!"

I wiped my brow with my sleeve and continued my confession. "My gag reflex was just too damn strong. I've

been sober now for over forty-five minutes, but I'm feeling very edgy."

I sat down and rested my chin on my chest for the rest of the meeting. I was loudly applauded for my disclosure and candor. Their warmth and acceptance of my problem, my addiction, was overwhelming. I now didn't mind looking like a frumpy, out-of-place clothes hound. If I weren't such an unrepentant bunghole, I might have been able to shed a few tears. Of course, they would have been crocodilian if I could've removed the scales from my eyes.

Drinks were served after the meeting. We might all be assholes in the Foreign Service, but we still enjoyed our booze. I ordered a wine because I was still on the wagon and I couldn't have anything stronger. Real men didn't need anything stronger because it was all about taking one step at a time. I observed Tommy and a shorter nun talking in a far corner of the room. I couldn't overhear what they were saying, but their dervish-like movements suggested a heated argument. I confidently reached this conclusion by the looks of their swirling burkas.

I vowed then to never wear a burka because my body language would be too easy to read and I also didn't want to get into another bad habit. I later followed Tommy back to his digs and then I went to mine. I was exhausted and emotionally drained.

Sometimes self-disclosure was a distasteful, painful exercise for those incorrigible assholes that served and protected.

I continued with my education and orientation over the next few days and learned the operations of the Ajax local guard task force from top to bottom. I now knew the ins-

and-outs of its recruitment procedures, fixed and mobile deployments, salary and benefits structure, time and attendance regimens, firearms qualifications and re-qualifications data, billing arrangements and numerous other mind numbing details. I counted how many angels Ajax could fit on the head of a pin. I had serious trouble keeping my face from hitting the desk.

I walked the guard posts with Ajax supervisors and rode the guarded convoys that transported staff to the military commissaries and PXs in the city. Virtually every guard was a non-American. They were recruited from a wide variety of countries where jobs were scarce, pay was low, and a strong work ethic still existed. Many came from the ranks of their country's police agencies and the military. They arrived in Kabul with high expectations, certain basic levels of training, some experience, and a shared desire to make big bucks. Disciplinary problems were few because nobody wanted to fuck-up the apple cart.

It was Friday night and that meant the Fire Pit on the chancery side. Fridays and Saturdays were days off for Muslims. Foreigners had great difficulty getting their workweeks straight here. There could be no "Saturday Night Fever" when you knew you had to get up early the following morning and go to work. The Pit was the social gathering spot for embassy employees and guests. It also held bingo and karaoke events on alternating Fridays.

These casual get-togethers were the embassy highlights for the week. The Pit was the place for outrageous drinking and equally outrageous behavior for those who needed to chill. It was a popular, local R&R spot for embassy staffers and their friends and it served as hub-central for weekend hookups as well. One never

could be sure about the future, so people partied with wanton abandon. In this dangerous environment, people never knew when or where they might go down for their country.

I easily spotted Irena in the crowd. She was the woman surrounded by all the guys wagging their tongues and tails. I went to the bar and ordered a glass of Zinfandel, my drink of choice. I sat at an empty table towards the bottom of the Pit and listened to ABBA, Boney M, and the Stones being played in the background. It must have been oldies night and a fitting tribute to a guy like me. The music didn't seem to interfere with the calling out of the bingo numbers to a less than rapt audience.

I caught Irena glancing my way a couple of times. She was a gorgeous woman, actually drop-dead hot in the parlance of those slightly younger than me. I was drop-dead in heat for her despite her nasty antics at the pool. Well, truthfully, because of her nasty antics, perhaps. Eventually, she joined me at my table.

For the next two hours, we drank and talked about nothing in particular. She shared some of her experiences growing up in Minsk. She said she had been a member of the 2000 Belarus Olympic gymnastics team and enjoyed all sports, especially water sports. I shared nothing with her. However, when I could get away with it, I stared at her face and body.

Unfortunately, I couldn't remember the color of her eyes, but they must have been pretty. She caught me looking at her several times and knew what I was thinking. She laughed at all of my stupid, little jokes because she thought I was particularly urbane and witty. I knew this to be true because she told me so several times. At one point, she reached over and squeezed my upper thigh.

The drinks made us mellow and giddy and we soon became best friends. By the way, Irena bought all of the rounds. That was the way it was done between new best friends. That was also the way it was done between government contractors and government officials.

Of course, it was all too obvious what Irena was up to. It was the oldest ploy in the book and I was offended both personally and professionally. This was nothing more than a crude attempt to entrap me in a compromising situation. I found the ploy almost laughable. The department had dealt with honey pot operations for decades during the Cold War. The Soviets, and their commie lackeys, had frequently used this intelligence technique against American officials and businessmen traveling and working abroad.

In short, the KGB would dangle attractive, often vulnerable appearing, women before naive and unsuspecting officials. These pretty harpies would flit and flutter around their targets. They would coo softly about deep love, carnal desires, and thoughts of world peace. Next, they would fly off with raw meat clasped in their talons to secluded dovecotes. There, they would devour their meals, usually over several feedings.

The pictures and/or videos would then be shown to the officials at a private screening. These were never held at locations of their choosing. The bad guys would threaten to expose their body parts and functions for all to see. In this instance, that meant their wives, kids and employers. Their careers and lives would be finished and they would go straight to jail and then to Hell for their indiscretions. Sometimes these scams worked like in the cases of Marine Sergeant Clayton Lonetree in Moscow in 1987 and much earlier with Irvin Scarbeck, a Foreign Service officer.

Remember, those were the days of strict non-fraternization with the locals.

Bangkok and Manila were popular R&R destinations for unattached Foreign Service males serving in Soviet bloc countries, especially for those with intense hormones and little patience for courting department-approved women. Actually, they were popular destinations for all Foreign Service officers who enjoyed sex on the cheap. In my day, these female spies were aptly dubbed *swallows*. Most of us in the Foreign Service were much too sophisticated to fall for such obvious entrapments.

I let Irena fuck my brains out later that evening and we had great sex. The Tantric maneuvers, coupled with my raging priapic condition, kept her begging for less all night. She felt like raw meat the next morning, but I couldn't wait to see the video. I only hoped the production values would be good. I already had some clever ideas about marketing it to one of the major fluffers in LA.

Sometimes those who served and protected were seminal entrepreneurs when it came to matters of the heart.

I continued my walkabout for almost another week. I reviewed all documentation relating to Ajax's task to protect the ambassador and other high ranking officials. I learned that most of their security personnel had a background in VIP protection, gained through service in the military or prior federal experience. They were well trained by Ajax and commanded higher pay and benefits than the regular security guards. Their retention rate was high since they received bonuses for staying and returning, if invited back by Ajax. It seemed to be a professional, well-run operation.

I laid on my bed thinking, but I tried to limit this activity as much as possible to preserve my precious bodily fluids. I needed to maintain my strength because the case would be solved by clear thinking and not just good strokes of luck. They had tried to kill me with the snake bit. They had tried to co-opt and seduce me through Irena. What next, a hefty bribe to back off the case? Yes, that was exactly what these arrogant jerks did!

When I opened the door to my room the next morning, I was greeted by ten large boxes that had been carefully stacked outside. I borrowed a ladder from maintenance and brought down each one. There were neatly wrapped bundles of Afghani scoots in each box totaling \$9,453.11. In one box was a note with words and letters cut from the embassy's newsletter, *The Cobbler*. It was called a *night letter* in the local lingo.

The Taliban would leave notes on the doorsteps of the homes of the embassy's local staff warning them to quit working for the infidels or face the wrath of Allah. These sometimes worked. Regardless, my missive was plain, simple, and to the point. I was to immediately stop the investigation. It actually used the words *quit fucking with us, asshole*. That might have been a subtle clue that the note wasn't written by the Taliban. The syntax just didn't seem right. If I didn't stop, I would suffer a tragic accident: one that would be life threatening.

I had the boxes, sans note, taken to the embassy disbursing office. I made a donation to the government by telling the clerk to credit the money to the embassy's general account ledger. I got a signed receipt because I would need it at tax time.

These guys were offensive, miserly, and not overly clever. They could have simply slipped an envelope

stuffed with large green under my door. I might even have accepted it. Well, that wasn't true; it wasn't nearly enough. It was now time to contact my good friend, one Mr. Jersey Briggs.

I emailed Jersey later that day from my laptop using his personal AOL address. Regrettably, the embassy's complex and sophisticated telecommunications system was too insecure. I told Jersey that someone had ordered one very serious fatwa on me. I didn't think it came from the Taliban. I asked for backup as soon as possible because I couldn't concentrate on my investigation and watch my backside at the same time. He later emailed back saying he understood and would come up with a game plan for my protection.

I also emailed Dan Sykes since I owed him a status report. I used his personal email account as well. As Secretary of State Henry Stimson famously said in 1929, "Gentlemen do not read each others' mail." Of course, he was full of crap, to put it diplomatically.

Sometimes those who served and protected found there were no gentlemen or women in this disingenuous game of spy versus spy.

I bided my time while cooling my heels. I continued to read the documentation provided by Tommy Thompson on Ajax's operations in Afghanistan. They were making a tidy sum off their efforts and I was green with envy.

Jersey finally got back to me with a plan and the name of someone who would be my alter ego and backup on the ground. That someone would protect my butt. And I couldn't have wished for a better agent. My stars were finally aligning. Or so I hoped.

Rex Gallant was his proper name. His DS nom de guerre was *Rambo*, a Rambo-like action figure who'd stick it to someone without a moment's hesitation. Rex had been a U.S. Navy Seal, assigned to Team Six for eight years. He joined the Navy straight out of high school like many of his classmates who couldn't find jobs in the rust belt of Ohio. During his career, he was assigned some of the most demanding and dangerous jobs around the world. He protected high value foreign officials friendly to the United States. He and his team tracked down and captured or killed foreign terrorists and insurgents on America's hit list. He was good at what he did without any remorse. Maybe sociopath would serve as a good handle for Rex too.

Rex resigned from the Navy because he became bored with the military mindset and rigmarole—a maverick at heart. He used his GI bill to get his bachelors, and later masters, degree in international relations from Georgetown's School of Foreign Affairs. He had been with DS for just over seven years and had graduated first in his basic agents' class of twenty-eight students. He had undergone virtually all types of tactical intelligence, anti-and counter terrorism, security and protection training known to man and the U.S. government, and a few foreign ones as well.

He was a crack shot, a black belt in karate, a paramedic, and a Para-jumper. He was a highly effective killer of men when circumstances required it. DS even put him through the *Stranger-Danger* course offered by the Fairfax County school system so he could spot and neutralize any pedophiles in the department. He successfully zeroed in on several childish Foreign Service officers over several months by trolling the Internet on the

kiddie porn sites. Like the rest of us, he could take on the role of a pubescent girl seeking sex from a 50 plus year old gentleman when the job called for it. Carnal, as well as other, knowledge came in handy from time-to-time in this biz. In sum, Rex was a consummate covert operator skilled in all the black arts of the trade. I now felt secure.

Rex was fast-tracked for overseas assignment given his intelligence, skills, background and experience. He served as an assistant regional security officer in Monrovia and Haiti during the bad times. He was now the deputy RSO in Islamabad; just a short hop, skip and jump from Kabul. Rex had also done a stint more recently in Afghanistan protecting President Hamid Karzai. As a result, he knew the country fairly well. This experience would be invaluable for what I had in mind. Rex would be my shadow; my eyes and ears away from the embassy. He'd watch my backside when I couldn't. Better yet, I would no longer have to carry a pocket mirror around with me. More than simple vanity, the mirror was a useful tool of the trade. In DS, hindsight was believed to be much clearer and more focused. Objects always appeared much smaller and less intimidating in the rear view. In any case, Rex would be my very own Rambo.

Rex would enter the country without embassy knowledge or permission. I'd put him up at the Serena Hotel downtown under an assumed name. I thought Mohammed M. Mohammed would be a good choice. In DS, we liked to keep things simple and memorable. I would arrange for a meet and assist at the airport since he would be bringing a large goodie bag. Ahmed picked up Rex at the airport two days later and ensconced him in the hotel as planned. He enjoyed a quiet afternoon at the pool, but it would be some time before he could relax again. The

needs of the service dictum would soon fully occupy his time and talents.

Sometimes those who served and protected didn't get many respites from danger or sunburn.

CHAPTER 9

CAPER DIEM

I was frustrated and piqued. No, I was pissed. I was going nowhere less than fast. I knew I wasn't going to crack the case by poring over invoices, contract amendments, and payroll data submitted and manipulated by Tommy. I had to get the goods on him the old fashioned way. I'd steal those goods and let the legal beagles sort things out later. U.S. case law was a little skimpy and sketchy on the subject of reasonable search-and-seizure procedures in war-torn Afghanistan. Maybe my investigation would set a new precedent. Regardless, Ahmed had told me that Tommy Thompson had a home away from home downtown. The locals didn't miss a thing.

I prepared for my evening's entertainment by donning a black, hooded jumpsuit. I attached my tool bag to my

utility belt and forcefully shoved Ms. Smith, butt-up, down into my crotch. I had sewn a hidden pocket there because I didn't want my gun discovered if I were stopped and frisked. Muslim cops were terribly squeamish about searching one's privates, regardless of rank. Not only India had untouchables tucked into unmentionables.

I blackened my face with axle grease and put on a black nikab just to be safe. I looked at myself in the mirror and was pleased with its reflection. It was a perfect guise for a perfect role: a Nubian religious pilgrim lost and confused in a strange land. I was hoping it might fool the local authorities if I got caught, *inshalla*. I slunk out of the compound and met Ahmed and Rex on the street.

As a team, we would maintain a very low-key and subtle profile; meaning that we wouldn't ride in a tricked-out Chevy Suburban. Ahmed had arranged for his brother, Rashid, to take us in his taxi since we didn't want to draw any undue attention. I noticed that Rashid had mounted a bobble head of Joe Camel on his dashboard. Joe had gained a cult-like following in much of the Middle East. He had come to symbolize the virtues of loyalty and steadfastness, especially for those Arabs who would walk a mile for their camels. We needed to embody those same virtues for our mission and Joe's presence had a calming effect on all of us. He would be our St. Christopher, our St. Jude, as we went forth this night in a Jesus-less land.

We cautiously negotiated the dirty, narrow, crowded back streets of the city. Not so coincidentally, the front streets looked much the same. We parked down the block from Tommy Thompson's *piéd-a-terre*. It was going to be an easy black bag job for someone with my talents,

experience, and skills. Ahmed, his brother, and Rex would serve as lookouts and intercept anyone who might enter. That would be done by ruse, bribe or lead sap, depending on the circumstances.

Tommy's pad was in a two-story walkup building in a neighborhood located fairly close to the embassy. His unit was on the middle floor and as I entered the foyer, I unscrewed the single 40-watt light bulb. I immediately bit down hard on my lower lip to stifle a scream. I'd forgotten to put on my black driving gloves. I wisely put on my gloves along with my night vision goggles. Those let me see clearly in otherwise dark places. The gloves didn't make any difference since the building's Braille signs were in Arabic.

I stealthily took the stairs by twos and stood outside Tommy's door. The door looked old and the lock even more so. It was an old skeleton key design. I opened my toolkit and removed a large piece of newspaper and a slim ballpoint pen. DS agents were well-versed in the arts of lock-picking since we were required to take the *DAME* course at the DS Training Academy in Dunn Loring, Virginia.

DAME was not a derogatory, sexist term. It stood for *Defense against Methods of Entry*. The course taught DS agents the latest in locking mechanisms and devices. This tradecraft was taught so we could apply the most advanced security techniques and technology in deterring, detecting or mitigating forcible or surreptitious entry to our embassies. Of course, the training taught us how to use the dark side of such things as well. For example, we knew how to pick, bypass or otherwise compromise door locks; attack and manipulate combination locks on safes and vaults; and, most

importantly, how to quickly open locked liquor cabinets without being caught.

I slid the newspaper under the door and pushed the pen through the keyhole. As I had hoped, Tommy had left the key in his door. The key dropped on the paper and I carefully pulled the paper to me. I now had his key in my hand and inserted it into the lock and slowly and quietly pushed the door open. It abruptly stopped after about six inches. Tommy had installed a chain lock for added protection, but it was no problem for us DAMEs.

I took out a rubber band, a paperclip, and a piece of adhesive tape from my toolkit. I put the pieces together by bending the paperclip into a hook and attaching it to the rubber band. These were attached to the tape. I put my arm through the door opening and placed the bent clip into a link of chain. I stretched the contraption and secured the tape to the back of the door. I closed the door and the chain was easily pulled out of its keeper. The door was now open.

I crept into the apartment and didn't even consider searching any room other than Tommy's bedroom. I didn't want to waste my time. I shot several strands of Silly String high in the air and watched them harmlessly float to the floor. I wanted to make certain that Tommy hadn't set up any alarm trip wires to alert him to intruders. He hadn't. I slowly opened the door to the master bedroom and saw Tommy sleeping with his back to me and snoring loudly.

I tiptoed by him and went straight for his drawers since these were classic hiding places for things of great import, such as the family jewels, especially for men. I went directly for his underwear, not even bothering with the other drawers in the chest. People naturally were

very queasy about opening someone else's underwear drawer. It was much too rude, personal, and offensive, so it was often overlooked during law enforcement searches. I think it had to do with our innate sense of propriety.

We had been taught an important investigative trick during basic agents training. The instructor had us remove our underwear in class to break this aversion. It made no difference if you were a male, female or a metro-sexual agent. All of us had to undergo this humiliating treatment in front of the others. We had to deposit our boxers, briefs, panties or whatever in a dresser drawer located at the front of the classroom. Those not wearing underwear were immediately washed out of training. The organization had a strict dress code. Involvement in a serious traffic accident or other incident could place the individual agent, and DS, in a most embarrassing and compromising situation.

The instructor would hide a gun, a classified document, passport, maybe a framed photo of J. Edgar Hoover, or other contraband in one of the drawers to hone our tactile abilities. We were blindfolded and told to open the correct drawer and find the item. Those who exhibited the slightest reluctance to do so were ridiculed by the instructor. He made us practice this technique over and over until we sated his sick sense of humor. My classmates and I became very close during training and we remained so to this day. We still did a little panting routine on the phone to tease each other and reminisce about that special time in our careers.

I had the advantage of owning the night with my goggles. I could clearly see the neatly arranged pairs of Kirkland *tightie-whities* in the drawer. Tommy and I were

kinsmen in this regard. I saw two CDs with the word *Ajax* written on their covers. I also saw a CD of the latest Jenna Jameson flick and quickly liberated all three.

Suddenly, the bedside phone rang. Initially, I froze, but was able to dive under the bed before Tommy fully awoke. The conversation lasted less than a minute. Tommy mentioned Kandahar, snow, visitors, and other things I couldn't make out from under the bed. Until then, I hadn't fully appreciated just how far the Afghan economy had come in the past few years. A ski resort in the south of the country would bring tourist dollars to this impoverished nation. This was a classic example of American business enterprise being practiced outside our borders. Well, maybe not exactly. In a very real sense, we were the loco parents for this troubled country.

Tommy eventually went back to sleep. He was intermittently snoring and grinding his teeth, except when he was babbling about Irena and her sexual prowess. I whispered back that I'd already had a taste and she was sweet. I firmly believed that subliminal suggestions were often the most tasteful. However, Tommy badly needed a Breath-Right nose strip, a mouth guard, and a large dose of saltpeter. I quietly slipped out of his apartment and out of the building.

It was all high-fives back at the taxi. Rashid didn't understand, but he gave us a hand anyway. We celebrated our exploits later at the embassy's Marine House bar. Due to strict Muslim law, liquor was absolutely forbidden; except on sovereign U.S. soil in a foreign country. I was very impressed that the Koran clearly recognized this important exception to the rule.

Sometimes those who protected and served had to bend the rules and elbows to meet their own high

standards of conduct.

I woke up early the next morning because I couldn't wait to look at the computer disks I had borrowed from Tommy. I loaded the first disk marked *Ajax* into the CD slot of my laptop. I planned to get through both *Ajax* disks today, but would keep the Jenna Jameson docudrama for later when I was up for it. I spent the next four hours examining the information on the CDs.

It seemed Tommy and his cohorts had developed a very clever and lucrative scam to defraud at least two U.S. government agencies of close to twenty-seven million dollars by my quick guesstimate, maybe more depending on the full extent of the matter. He was also guilty of incredible arrogance thinking he could get away with this nonsense. For his arrogance alone, he would feel the merciless blade of Avery Dick's terrible, swift sword.

The scheme, or I should say schemes, had interrelated elements to maximize Tommy's profits. It started with the fact that *Ajax* had over sixty-five ghost employees on its payroll. This was out of a purported total of 328 guards, trainers, and protection agents assigned under contract to the embassy. The State Department was being billed month after month for nonexistent people and services. Padding the old payroll was not a particularly remarkable defalcation. Money, especially U.S. government money, was plentiful and ripe for taking under the circumstances. It was a not so uncommon business practice in Afghanistan and Iraq, although wholly unethical and illegal. If you weren't clever and lucky, you did not pass GO—you went directly to jail.

Ajax, like all other contractors, billed the department at

what was called a loaded hourly rate. The rate included a base rate of pay for each security position specified in the contract. The rate then greatly swelled with the inclusion of pro rata medical, disability and life insurance benefits, housing costs, meal allowances, hardship differentials and danger provisos. A modest (or immodest, if you prefer) profit and administrative fee were then added on top—also known as a billable hour.

In this instance, the department was billed forty-five dollars per hour for every Ajax employee, 24/7, 365 days a year. One ghost guard position was costing the department \$394,200 a year. Of course, supervisory ghost positions were billed at a higher loaded rate. Those numbers added up to about twenty-five million dollars annually in fraudulent charges by my quick count. The typical Ajax gate guard made about twenty dollars an hour and received a dorm bunk along with meager food chits for the embassy cafeteria.

Tommy submitted his monthly Ajax invoices to RSO Larry Bumpkiss. Larry would check them for accuracy and certify their correctness for payment. Obviously, Larry was asleep at the switch. On a spot check basis, he should have matched names and hours worked with a real body. He hadn't and he was negligent and maybe culpable as well. The bill was then sent to disbursement for processing and payment. A check was then cut to Ajax Afghanistan, Ltd. The payment would go into the local Ajax bank account controlled by Tommy Thompson. Tommy would later send a wire transfer of funds to Ajax London, less the money he'd skimmed for the ghosts. He kept the existence of their nonexistence secret from the home office. The books always balanced since they were well-cooked.

Tommy found even greater utility for his phantoms. Merely billing the department for their loyal service to the United States didn't satisfy his greed. He also killed them off when he had the chance. He forced them to commit suicide or experience horrendous traffic accidents on the notoriously dangerous roads of Afghanistan. These terrible things invariably occurred on the job. After all, it was a war zone and bad things did happen to good people. Death benefits, medical costs, and monthly disability allowances had to be paid to these employees or spouses and/or children.

Sometimes it was only right and fair to justly compensate those who served and protected.

The Defense Base Act of 1941 was passed by Congress to protect all civilian contract personnel, regardless of nationality, working overseas for the U.S. government. It was essentially an extension of U.S. workman compensation laws for those working abroad. It was especially important for those living and working in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Don't let the word *defense* fool you though. Through many amendments, the work didn't have to be related to defense or national security. Someone only needed to be an employee or an independent consultant working for a U.S. contractor who was working for Uncle Sam overseas.

The law required all such companies to participate in the act's provisions or face severe penalties. Companies contributed a modest sum for each employee into a pool of money administered by the U.S. Department of Labor. Labor handled all claims and other matters concerning the act. Like workmen's comp, the act covered deaths

and injuries resulting from on-the-job accidents. Its rules for compensation were unusually liberal in defining a work-related incident. Everything in Afghanistan was work related. It was an American war zone and a place of unlimited financial opportunities for those willing to seize them. The disks disclosed at least nine incidences of fraud perpetrated by Tommy against the U.S. Department of Labor.

Moses Amdulla was a ghost Nigerian who died in a terrible car accident while driving to an Ajax meeting held at the embassy. His wife and children in Lagos received a lump sum payment of \$152,000, plus the costs to send his body home and a flat \$3,000 stipend to cover his funeral expenses. The family, if it had existed, would live handsomely off the U.S. government's largesse.

In reality, the money was wired to a fictitious bank account in Lagos opened by one of Tommy's cronies. He or she would withdraw the cash and keep a fee for services rendered. The rest would be wired to a numbered account in the Grand Caymans for Tommy and his associates. I said associates because the logistical dimensions of this scam were too big for one person. Several cretins were involved in ripping off Uncle Sam.

Filipino Hector Arroyas died by his own hand or I should have said gun. He swallowed his pistol while standing post. He was suffering severe depression over being separated so long from his lovely wife, Emilia. She and Hector had nine children from their six year union. Emilia visited the consular section at the U.S. embassy in Manila to pick up the check. She later dutifully wired the \$181,000.43, less her fee, to the Caymans. It was one tragic, heartrending story after another.

These fairytales alone ended up costing the government approximately 1.2 million dollars. It was small change for Tommy and his buddies, but it was largely a game for him to see just how far he could push the pay envelope. Tommy would fill out the claim forms with great authority and imaginative flair. As Ajax's local representative, he would certify the information to be true and correct to the best of his knowledge.

He would take the completed paperwork to the embassy's consular section where one of the officers would notarize each document and emboss it with the U.S. Seal. It didn't get more authoritative or official than that. Tommy was determined to feed his piggy bank until it broke under its own weight.

Tommy then added insult to his injury to U.S. coffers. Once a month, he would have tens of thousands of U.S. dollars wired from the Caymans to his private account in Kabul. He would withdraw the money in cash and take it to the big money-changers in the city. There he would exchange his green for Afghanis at a highly favorable rate of exchange. The black market rate was typically 30 to 40 percent higher than the artificial, but official, rate set by the government of Afghanistan to prop up its currency. Tommy would then take the scoots to the embassy's currency exchange and do what was called a reverse accommodation of funds. He would convert the scoots back into U.S. dollars at the official rate and make a tidy profit from the transaction.

Large, reverse accommodations were usually only permitted at the end of a Foreign Service officer's tour. That was when the officer would sell his or her car, furniture, first born and anything else of value before leaving post. He or she would price everything in scoots

and insist on selling at the current black market rate, not the official exchange rate. This represented the true value of the merchandise in the local economy. I had no idea how much money Tommy made off this scam. Much later, I found he had been granted a special dispensation for these transactions by the embassy's deputy chief of mission, Ambrose Pierce.

I was ecstatic! I had cracked the case wide open. *Book him Dan-o*, I mentally exclaimed. I poured myself a glass of Zinfandel to celebrate. The IG's forensic accountants could easily piece things together and build a solid case against these guys. The names, dates, amounts of money, and bank account numbers in the CDs were damning. More importantly, the evidence would be actionable and persuasive in court. The rest of my investigation would be routine. I could wrap-up the loose ends within a week or so and I'd be home with my sons for Christmas.

I sent Dan Sykes a lengthy email message about what I had found. He said he was pleased and would forward the information to his team in Iraq. If it was going on here, it was certainly going on in Iraq. I decided not to write Jersey Briggs. I didn't want this discovery to leak to the department Dragons or news media.

Sometimes silence was the better part of valor for those who wished to continue to serve and protect.

CHAPTER 10

RUDE AND CRUDE AWAKENING

I had a date tonight with Jenna and admitted to myself that I was a bit nervous. I'd been having impure thoughts since rescuing her from Tommy's apartment and was worried that she could sense my anxiety and urgency and it would be a turnoff for her. I'd met her briefly before, but had run out of quarters before consummating a close friendship. However, from our brief encounter, I was already strongly drawn to her bright smile, cute Midwestern accent, and other coming attractions. Tonight would be different though. Tonight would be the night!

I stripped off my filthy clothes and headed to the

bathroom. I brushed my teeth, shaved, and flossed. I trimmed my eyebrows and nose and soaked my fingers in a solution of Arm & Hammer baking soda to remove the nicotine stains. I carefully Q-tipped my ears since I wanted to be aurally desirable for her. I then took a long shower, shampooing with the soap that I taken from the Radisson in Delhi. It had a manly scent of sour apples.

I paid special attention to my knees and the palms of my hands, my erogenous zones that I callously guarded. That was because in my position I sometimes had to get down on all fours and beg. I slicked my hairs back across my forehead. Lastly, I administered a coffee enema because I enjoyed a stimulating, low-colonic regimen of Joe now and then. It was relaxing except for the incessant reminders from Mrs. Olson that ‘it was good to the last drop.’

I vigorously toweled off to unleash my most powerful endorphin agents. I’d only release the pheromones as backup, just in case—I needed all the help I could get. I then put on my smoking jacket. I think coming clean with one’s partner was important in a relationship. It wasn’t only a matter of good hygiene, but a sign of respect. I wanted her to want me. I wanted so much from her. I only prayed she wouldn’t find me too needy and vulnerable.

I was extremely stiff since I hadn’t done this sort of thing in awhile. I had to be fluid and supple for Jenna so I did a couple of sit-ups and windmills to loosen up. I put on a samba record in the back of my mind, tossing aside its jacket cover with careless abandon. I’d worry about collecting it and my wits later. I think the song was *The Girl from Ipanema*, but I couldn’t be sure because of the strong back-beat of the Brazilian rhythms.

I lovingly took Jenna in my arms and we danced and

pranced around my room. We dipped, swooned, entwined, and cavorted for the next ten minutes or so. I stopped a couple of times to change the record. By the way, she was surprisingly light on her feet. Regardless, my longing-loins were ablaze with pent-up desire for her.

However, there was still more to do to prepare for our amorous tryst. I poured two glasses of Zinfandel into clean Dixie cups and moved the room's Gideon Bible to the bottom of the wardrobe closet. I turned it facedown and threw a couple of dirty towels over it just to be safe. I hoped to God that Mr. Gideon wasn't a voyeur. If so, he'd later pay dearly for the privilege. Occasionally, I enjoyed hitting the books. I then lit three small wax candles and positioned them on top of the TV. I pulled out the wick from the air freshener bottle. It was cinnamon spice; spicy just like my Jenna. I was now in excruciating heat. I turned off the overhead light because I found that mood and ambiance were surefire seducers. Next, I leaned back in bed and lit a cigarette to calm my ardor. For what it was worth, I always smoked before sex. Actually, I smoked during and afterwards too.

I finally couldn't contain myself anymore so I roughly grabbed Jenna by her CD and popped her cover. I slowly inserted her into the player in my laptop and turned up her volume a few notches. I wanted to hear and memorize her every utterance. That way, I'd be able to listen to the heady dialogue to the fullest. We set our love-play on slow-motion to limber us up. However, what I saw next really excited me, becoming even more alert and erect as a result.

For the next two hours, I kept my eyes focused on the screen. I simply couldn't believe what I was seeing. Instead of being greeted by Jenna Jameson au natural,

the CD contained data and documentation describing a complex and elaborate scheme to spin straw into gold. It was beautiful and elegant in design. Whoever was involved in this stuff was scoring serious money—millions and millions of dollars by the looks of it. I was now in business and Christmas with my kids might have to wait.

Sometimes an insatiable appetite for porn was an admirable trait for those who served and protected.

I spent the next couple of days digesting what I'd discovered. This was one massive, mother of all mothers scheme. It was audacious. It was downright brilliant! Tommy's other scams paled by comparison. I knew I had to follow the money to unravel the scheme's intricacies and idiosyncrasies. We said *follow the money* in DS. We didn't say *follow the yellow brick road*—that's too crass and sissy even by department standards. Everyone else in federal law enforcement circles said the same thing though about the money. There was no sense of attribution, shame, or copyright protection among government plagiarists.

It was another day and another Afghani or scoot or greenback. You can take your pick of the litter. Today was a shitty one since I couldn't duck an obligation to an embassy function at the junction. I'd been invited to the embassy's annual Thanksgiving Day dinner gala. I was among the chosen few of everyone invited to the event. Thankfully, it only came around once a year because it called for wearing informal attire. We didn't say *clothes* in the Foreign Service when a more elegant, snobbish word would suffice.

Formal attire would have meant a tuxedo and I refused

to wear one all my years in the Foreign Service, except for the Marine Ball held in November to celebrate the Corps' birthday. I did that out of respect for the Marine security guards who worked for me when I was an embassy regional security officer. Otherwise, I thought the tuxedo-wearers looked like a bunch of penguins, waddling around with a cocktail in one hand and a long cigarette holder in the other. I liked Burgess Meredith, but that was too much for me.

I picked a charcoal gray suit out of the wardrobe suite. It was the only one I had brought to post. *It had better suit me*, I joked to myself. I put on a heavily starched white shirt and added a nice floral tie. I hadn't had a good-looking tie around my neck since I was assigned to the embassy in Bangkok in the early eighties. I shot my cuffs and gazed at myself in the mirror. I knew deep-down I still had the old panache and *joie de vivre* that lesser men lacked.

I absolutely detested these embassy shindigs. I recalled a July Fourth celebration I had attended at the ambassador's residence in Panama some years earlier. Those were the days when General Manuel Noriega, the military dictator of Panama, was at the height of his power. Independence Day was a very special event for America and its numerous Panamanian guests. However, I was forcibly ejected from the party by the Marine security guards shortly after I arrived at the residence. I set back relations between the two countries by several days as a result of my antics. Yes, I ended up as the turd floating in the diplomatic punch bowl.

I showed up wearing a full-dress military uniform, one similar to the one worn by the generalissimo. It had medals, epaulets, ribbons, bright gold buttons and a red

shoulder sash like I had seen in His Nib's photos in the papers. That little bit of dressing-up was enough to get me booted, but I took things a wee bit further.

I hung a long piece of rope around my neck which dangled a potato in front of my crotch. In other words, I went as a *dick-tater*. I was forever on the outs with the ambassador after that diplomatic faux pas. However, I was hero-worshiped by everyone else at post, especially by the Panamanian staff. Manny Noriega was now Uncle Sam's houseguest at a federal penitentiary in Florida and his independence celebration was still some years off.

I entered a large room in the chancery set up with tables, chairs and all the Thanksgiving fixings. I found a seat next to someone I didn't know and didn't really want to meet. I liked my own company and can carry on cogent conversations with my other selves for hours at a time. People filed into the room in singles, couples and groups. Most were hanging their heads in anticipation of the evening's gala event. We all had to put on party hats featuring colorful turkeys. I thought the party favors were wholly appropriate for the occasion.

I then spotted Larry Bumpkiss and his entourage. It was easy since each DS agent was neatly dressed and wearing a Diplomatic Security Service pin on his or her jacket lapel. The lapel pins were especially useful on large protection details with multiple VIPs and multiple agencies protecting them. They were used to quickly identify friend from foe. The DS pin held a replica of the organization's small gold shield on a red background.

It symbolized team spirit and pride for those so anointed to wear it. Many years earlier, a DS wag thought that a redesigned lapel pin could better capture the true nature of the Diplomatic Security Service. He suggested

that a *crossed knife and fork* be placed over the shield. He was quickly advised that it wouldn't be a career enhancing move on his part.

The shield survived in its present form for those less gluttonous agents who protected and served.

I noticed two female DS agents standing with Larry. By their posture and bearing alone, I could tell they were agents in good standing. Female agents were uncommon in DS until about 2000. That was when someone realized it was a new millennium—that was when someone realized that female and minority hiring was not only the right thing to do, but it was also required by federal statute. DS reacted by immediately going on a hiring frenzy to recruit women, the elderly, Mormons, illegal aliens, the deaf and/or mute, and especially the emotionally disturbed. Reds, tans, blacks, browns, yellows, mulattos and greens were especially good catches for the bureaucratic bottom anglers. DS was turning out to be a rainbow coalition.

Actually, DS would hire anyone who could tolerate its torturous and unending pre-employment investigation process. Perseverance and blind hopefulness were desirable personality traits for aspiring agents in those days. But DS was determined to cover the entire legal waterfront to avoid any hint of favoritism or any suggestion that it was only hiring white, Anglo Saxon males who graduated from name schools located in the northeastern parts of the States. The department quickly became fully committed to the principle of avoiding class-action lawsuits from any and all special interest and/or advocacy groups in America. It was another shining example of diversity in action. This was all accomplished in accord with the best traditions and self-interests of the

State Department.

The evening went well considering such things. I avoided Larry and he avoided me. I drank my wine and ate the excellent food prepared by members of the embassy's women's association, the Kabul International Ladies' Legation. Ambassador Heinz Caldwell capped off the evening with a short speech. He was flanked by the American flag and two Marine security guards wearing dress blues and standing at attention. The man was regally attired in a single-breasted, white tuxedo with satin peak lapels—his left lapel sported a large U.S. flag pin.

"Welcome to all," he said. "And thank you for joining us tonight to celebrate Thanksgiving and the high-minded principles it represents to true patriots."

He cleared his throat a bit and said "I speak of America's forefathers' vision of a strong, just, and compassionate nation. We are one great country of many peoples. As most of you in the Afghan intelligentsia appreciate, America was consecrated by God Almighty and his only son, Jesus. By the way folks, he's not called damn *Hay-Zeus*," he quickly clarified.

He added that he couldn't fully vouch for Jesus Christ's bona fides given his Hebraic heritage, but knew for a fact God was an American. To prove his point, he pulled a dollar bill out of his wallet and held it up for all to see. We immediately recognized what it was; the thing that no longer gave change back at McDonald's. Regardless, he correctly pointed out the bill had the words "In God We Trust" prominently printed on its reverse.

"No right-minded American would ever entrust his money to a foreigner, so God must be an American. It's

only logical. We are one indivisible nation,” he continued.

He defined the word *indivisible* for us. He said that it meant things like church and state couldn't be separated by a piece of paper. He added that *motherhood* and *apple pie* were Native American words that couldn't be spoken by our enemies in the same sentence. Some at our table giggled and some women clapped at his cute bon mots. In his befuddled mind, they were simply faux pearls thrown before unworthy and gullible swine. But he still managed to shoot back a smile from his bully pulpit. He had no compunctions about doing so since little people were of no consequence in his egomaniacal world. However, the fawns in the audience were still awestruck by his brilliant illuminations. It was a thoroughly crass act on the ambassador's part, but the assemblage ate it up along with their desserts.

The ambassador went on to say “We Americans are altruistic, principled, and gracious people.” We could tell his emotions were running high since he drooled ever so slightly while carefully mincing his words. At one point, he tightly held his right arm close to his body to keep it from snapping forward. He then regained his composure and concluded his speech.

“Here's to America, our Motherland!” he exclaimed, raising his champagne flute to the gathering as a gracious toast to our nation.

“Hey, hey, USA!” he chanted over and over to the delight of his parishioners. His enthusiasm was contagious and the crowd roared back with the same refrain. People formed into a slinky, conga line and snaked around the room to the tumultuous chanting. Someone suggested doing the limbo to see how low we could go while balancing drinks on our stomachs. Damn,

I just loved traditional Thanksgiving pageantry.

Ambassador Caldwell was a sagacious scholar, a natural leader of men, and a Renaissance man in his own right. Most importantly, he was the senior diplomat of the greatest nation on earth. He represented the best America had to offer to the desperate people of Afghanistan.

“Oh, by the way, please donate any leftovers of our fabulous feast to our underprivileged and undernourished Afghan colleagues at the embassy,” he thoughtfully added, before stepping down from the podium.

But as an afterthought, “Needless to say, I expect the obligatory *thank you* note from each attendee on my desk by Monday afternoon at the latest and in English, of course.” Like everyone else in the room, I stood and applauded the gentleman’s chutzpah. But the pumpkin pie would have to wait another year because I’d already had more than my fill of Thanksgiving pomp and pomposity. It really was all too much to swallow in one sitting.

I later moseyed back to my room. After many drinks and too much food, DS agents never walked, they always moseyed. Despite my heavy drinking, smoking, eating, and sexual regimen, without other exercise, I still honored my body as a temple. But I suspected at this point in my life, it was much like those in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sometimes those who served and protected were much too sensitive about the state of their national health and body politic.

I was seriously hung over the next morning and I needed to join a new temple. I had too much merriment

at the embassy party and now paying the price for my frivolity. Ok, I felt like shit on a shoe to put it succinctly. However, I still needed to set up an appointment with Chief Special Agent, Craig Williams of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration: the man in charge of our government's enormous narcotics suppression program in Afghanistan. I wasn't with the FBI, so I suspected he would deign to speak with me.

I needed a quick primer on the drug trade in Afghanistan. I needed to know the scope and nature of it; who the major players were, how they moved the product, and how they laundered the money. I needed to know everything and I needed to learn quickly. I forced down some Joe along with four aspirins. I had another cigarette before I hit the road. Actually, it was a short walk through the tunnel to the chancery side to get to Craig's office, but I liked to say *hit the road*. Again, it was the rough Foreign Service lingo thing at work.

In absolute disgust, I'd finally thrown down the gauntlet and enrolled Fred in flight school. He'd had it too damn easy as far as I was concerned and spent too much time cooling his tail feathers in his catbird seat. He'd laze on his clothesline for hours ogling the pussy walking by. I was jealous. He was getting more kitty than I could ever dream of and he had a rapacious appetite.

It was now high time for him to earn his keep. I'd had enough of his beak talk when he sassed me. I would no longer listen to the *birds of a feather* crap he dished out when he tried to play me. As they said in West Virginia, "this birddog don't hunt." I had to be strong for myself and America. No sir, he'd get with the program or else. Nobody played Avery the Dick for a dodo, most

especially Fred the falcon.

I had rescued him from the vile conditions of the souk's aviary and he owed me his very life. There, he was at great risk of contracting the deadly human papillomavirus from loving, but thoughtless, passing tourists carelessly blowing him kisses. Sometimes people just needed to pay more attention to the health of others, such as those who smoke. If the virus spread to the general bird population, up to half could die excruciating deaths in short order. Other than flying head first into spotlessly clean glass windows, Alfred Hitchcock couldn't think of a more gruesome way for them to expire. Wild and domesticated birds would suffer alike. It likely would be one bloody birdbath!

Few birds would likely escape the ravages of man and his filthy contagion. Afghan women would scramble to protect the innocent eggs of their chicks. Easter would be an especially unhappy time for the children of the nation. All of the Popeye's franchises in the country would be forced to close their doors overnight. There would be no Afghan swallows vacationing in California this season. It could be a pandemic of biblical proportion and scale. Like every catastrophe, a few would profit from the misery of others. Enterprising milliners would fashion millions of tiny niqabs to mask the vulnerable beaks of the flying dead. Oh God, the inhumanity of it all.

Worse, the virus could jump species barriers to infect lizards and dung beetles, the most plentiful and nutritious food sources of the people of Afghanistan. Mass hunger would follow famine. Muslims would be incapable of saying Mass to deliver them from this plague. The Afghan economy would lurch backwards in its bid to become a third world, economic powerhouse.

President Karzai's credibility, along with Obama's, would plummet overnight. He would be unable to succeed himself in office, despite a strong desire to do so. I certainly hadn't meant Karzai. He'd already had enough of the shithole and secretly wished to be comfortably self-exiled in Europe or the States. Regardless, this could be the stark future facing Afghanistan and all because of an innocent kiss sent from the heart.

As to Fred, I had saved his butt, but he'd been a total ingrate since. I could've vented much more, but suspected I'd already feathered and fouled my own nest enough. However, the message was loud and clear: school was now in session for Fred; this time with a righteous headmaster.

Fred had an important mission in my investigative strategy. He needed to execute his role flawlessly. If he couldn't straighten up and fly right, all could be lost because he was a key to our success. I assigned Ahmed the task of training Fred since he was a tenacious taskmaster who wouldn't tolerate any backtalk from a bird. I knew I could count on him to do the right thing. In any case, he certainly wouldn't just wing his crucial assignment.

Once during the day and once each night, Ahmed would hood Fred, remove his tether and take him down from his perch. He would carry Fred to his brother Rashid's taxi which was waiting outside the compound. There, Fred would be tied down in the car's trunk. He would now be a hooded bird flying blind in the blackness of a dark world at midnight in a coalmine. That artless statement meant Fred couldn't see Jack or anyone else

for that matter. Rather, he had to solely rely on his instincts and intelligence to survive the ordeal. I hoped to God that Fred didn't have cataracts!

For the next two hours, Rashid and Ahmed would aimlessly drive around the city. They would occasionally stop for the fat, naked and seductive falafel openly sold in the street. They often sated their thirsts with chilled RC Colas. Time was never of essence in their task; however, a keen sense of direction was of critical importance, at least for Fred.

Their ultimate destination was the Serena Hotel where they'd take Fred out of the trunk and put him in a cardboard box and carry him to the fifth floor of the building. Rex Gallant would open the door for them and allow Ahmed to walk directly to the balcony. There, he took Fred out of his box, removed his hood, and propped him on the railing facing in the direction of the embassy.

Anytime Fred turned his head, Ahmed would gently snap his neck back into proper alignment. Training was all about focus. Ahmed patiently repeated this regimen until Fred got it right or could no longer hold his head high. Rex and Rashid looked on with rapt attention since they'd never witnessed an Afghan swear so much in Pidgin English.

This same routine continued over many days until we thought Fred had the drill down pat. Communications in a war-torn, third world country like Afghanistan were poor in the best of times. The first storm, terrorist incident, plague, coup or other lame excuse would immediately bring down the electricity grid, the landline telephone system, and all, or most, of the cell towers. Typically, these events were not the result of Mujahideen inspired actions. Rather, it was the fact that every Afghan woman

got on her cell phone at the same time to find out what was going on. The situation was exacerbated by the women simultaneously turning on their TV sets to watch the soaps beamed in from Iran.

The most popular one was the touching story of the evil vizier who embroiled his nation in jingoistic foreign wars to pay for the sins of his father. At the end of each show, the emotionally overwrought women would be bushed. The selfish acts of the women simply overwhelmed local power distribution and telecommunications infrastructures. Like most manmade things, they crashed under the enormous weight of feminine demand.

However, the embassy radio network was no better. Its repeater station atop a nearby mountain would be repeatedly sabotaged by the Mujahedeen. It was tough to get a service call answered. But Fred would serve as a vital communications link between Rex and I when things went to shit, as they often did there. He was to be our own Jerry-rigged 911 line. However, the jury was still out on how well it might work.

The proof was in the pudding or the falcon as the case might be. Peregrine falcons were renowned for their speed and cunning. Fred wouldn't be a clay pigeon for any insurgent sharpshooter since he was too damn quick and nimble. On a good day, when winds were just right, he could easily do Mach 2. We decided to set up a solo test flight and carefully checked the weather conditions. We then filed a flight plan and released him at the embassy compound.

He lazily circled the security K-9 kennels on the grounds a couple of times before heading in the direction of the Serena. That was good because I didn't want him

dogged by any doubt. Fred flew fast, straight and true as I'd hoped. He landed on Rex's balcony four minutes and ten seconds later. He must have made a slight detour since he plopped a slightly disheveled, pregnant alley cat at Rex's feet. It was a "seven-fur" in Fred's book and it didn't get much better. She wouldn't be mourned, except by the huge, sewer rodents which had just gotten stiffed on their next meal. Darwin would have been proud. Rex, Ahmed, Rashid and I certainly were.

It was another wonderful day in the neighborhood. I'd finally snagged an appointment with Craig Williams, the DEA chief. He was an incredibly busy and stressed guy and I wondered what he was taking to get through the day. I had asked for a general briefing on the drug situation in Afghanistan; just a primer for those with State Department induced ADD. I had read the stuff everyone else had about poppies, opium, and heroin and knew it was a big problem, but I didn't understand how big a problem until he finished his brief.

He started with the bad news first. America and her allies were losing the war on drugs in Afghanistan. As you might have guessed, there was no good news. He said there was strong evidence of a downward trend, or at least a leveling off, in the production of the world's most illicit drugs with one notable exception; heroin, with most of it flowing from one out-of-control province in southern Afghanistan. Its name was Helmand Province and it was the birthplace and ancestral home of President Hamid Karzai.

There weren't enough resources to control the drug flow, according to Craig. More importantly, there wasn't a national will on the part of the Afghan authorities to

suppress or eradicate the problem. He said the DEA felt like a bunch of many-fingered lesbians trying to plug all the dyke holes in Holland. I admired his feminist allusion and butch smile.

Indeed, he mentioned that opium production had shot up dramatically in the past several years under the noses of the coalition forces fighting the Taliban. In 2002, Afghanistan retook the heroin crown from Burma. The latest Afghan numbers were so large that the country now accounted for 92 percent of the illicit global crop. The annual harvest involved almost three million Afghans and was worth \$3 billion as a raw product. That was about 6,600 metric tons. The raw or semi-processed opium was shipped to Iran and Turkey for refinement and subsequent distribution throughout the world. A smaller portion went east to Hong Kong or other Asian cities to satisfy the demands and addictions of the citizenry.

Craig said that from a law enforcement point of view, the higher yields suggested a number of things. One was that the Taliban might be stockpiling heroin in large amounts, particularly in Europe, to flood the markets with cheap, but highly potent narcotics. That would be tantamount to an act of terrorism; a scenario in which illicit drugs would serve as weapons of mass destruction.

However, President Karzai refused to allow the poppy fields to be sprayed since he understood the likely consequences of such an act: mass rioting and civil war. Afghan farmers could make ten times more money growing opium poppies than wheat. Three million citizens would be very unhappy if their cash crop and livelihood disappeared.

The toll though on the local population was high. Heroin addiction was a pervasive problem in Afghanistan.

Craig mentioned that in Kabul a single fix could weigh between fifty and one hundred grams. It came wrapped in tinfoil and sold for the equivalent of \$1.60. For the majority of heroin addicts, the sum was a real challenge to come up with—several times a day. The average daily wage, for those lucky enough to have work, was three dollars. Petty thievery and shaking down friends and relatives for money were the most common hustles to meet their needs and habits.

According to the government's own 2005 figures, over one million citizens were addicted to heroin. Many became so as refugees in Pakistan and Iran during the Taliban years from 1996 to 2001. Sixty thousand of these addicts lived within the capital. The majority were males, some as young as twelve years old.

The front line of Afghanistan's own fight against heroin's wide grip lay in the outskirts of Kabul. Not nearly sufficient, the ten-bed detox facility went by the name "Nejat Center", meaning "rescue" in Dhari. Each Saturday, new intakes were welcomed, sent by outreach officials from the country's thirty-four provinces. For fifteen days, they stayed there going cold turkey through the process of ridding their heroin from their bodies. Under these circumstances, the cure was sometimes worse than the disease.

Craig said the number one drug guy in Afghanistan was Sheik Mohammed, a powerful warlord living in Kandahar. He was Mr. Big and was ruthless and shrewd—he had to be to stay the top dog in a large pack of aggressive curs. He was thoroughly wired to the right Afghan and Pakistani officials. He relied on their help and loyalty and they relied on his generous bribes. It was an amenable and profitable relationship for all concerned. It

was the way business was properly done in these parts.

I asked Craig for his telephone number and address. He said it was embassy extension 213, chancery complex building number 3, apartment 303. I asked again for Sheik Mohammed's number and address in Kandahar.

Craig laughed, saying that everyone knew where the sheik lived since it was the largest, gaudiest palace in the city. It was the one down the street from the only livable hotel in town. It was the one decorated with many swarthy-looking gunsels, rolls of razor wire, and packs of snarling Dobermans. He sardonically added that I couldn't miss it for my life.

Craig told me he'd arrange for one of his confidential informants to set up a meeting with Sheik Mohammed, if I wished. I most certainly wished because I needed to get some answers. If Mohammed wouldn't come to the mountain, then Avery Dick would move heaven and earth to go to Kandahar.

I would send Rex and Ahmed to Kandahar ahead to keep abreast of what was afoot. I had a hunch they'd learn much by being afar. They'd stay at the one decent local hotel. I'm afraid I'd have to overnight at the Multilateral Force Forward Operating Base located adjacent to the town because I'd picked the short straw.

I thanked Craig for his candid remarks and his help. I left thinking about my addictions and indulgences: wine, cigarettes, food, and sex. I decided to continue thinking about them.

Sometimes those who served and protected were a little skittish about condoning or condemning the vices of others.

CHAPTER 11

UNTOLD WAR STORIES

We flew slow and low while a Cobra gunship covered us the whole trip. We stayed directly over National Route 5, the highway linking Kabul and Kandahar. The pilot unerringly navigated the craft using the latest Michelin road maps. We passed small villages and lots of open spaces. One couldn't deny there was a certain rugged beauty to the country. It became more beautiful as we flew over field upon field of cultivated poppies. The red flowers had green written all over their petals and I would never look at Veterans Day celebrants the same way again.

The chopper set down gently with the dust from the rotors blinding us until we moved a distance away. The chopper did a touch-and-go and then jumped into the air and was out of sight within a few short minutes. There

was a small welcoming party from the base to greet us. I immediately puked my guts. Vomit projected from my mouth and cords of snot flowed from my nose—*bad timing for a photo op*, I thought. Being an action guy, I quickly wiped everything from my face and deposited it on my sleeves and the back of my parachute pants. I then composed myself and shook hands with the camp commander. I did the Foreign Service cheek-kiss thing with one of the better looking women in the receiving line. I just couldn't stomach helicopter rides.

The camp commander's name was Dexter Billings and he was from Montana, but everyone called him William. He was a career-impaired Foreign Service officer who was desperate for money. He was successfully hiding out from his ex-wife and his many creditors back in the real world. He remained somewhat lucid and coherent during his briefing, although he slurred his words a little and occasionally drank from a small flask to clear his throat. He was a most mellow master-of-ceremonies.

William actually put on an impressive *dog and pony* show for us. The State Department borrowed the expression from the Defense Department some years ago after it went out of vogue there. For the State Department though, it took on new meaning. It meant you had better pony up contributions to the annual Combined Federal Campaign or you'd be dogged for the rest of your career. I always donated to the Girl Scouts of America knowing it would be a tax write off and also provide just dessert for my sparse dinner guests.

He explained by map and words what the coalition's forward operating bases did or supposed to do and where they were located. He said there were a total of thirteen FOBs in the country, strategically located to

assist and support the Karzai government's provincial projects such as building hospitals, schools and roads. They were intended to provide badly needed infrastructure, humanitarian aid, and a measure of security and prosperity to the people. He noted that each FOB was headed by a commander and deputy and had a civilian staff of specialists, along with a military contingent for security purposes. Different nations staffed the various FOBs, but all reported to the multinational force headquarters in Kabul, right next door to the U.S. embassy.

He never slipped once and said SOBs. He also never used the indelicate word *pacification* to describe what we were doing in Afghanistan. That would have represented a terrible diplomatic gaffe, a frontal affront in front of largely disinterested visitors. Finally, he failed to mention that the FOB concept wasn't working all that well. Maybe thirteen was an unlucky number after all.

The Taliban repeatedly attacked construction workers and local officials, sent night letters and did anything else to dissuade them from working for the infidel invaders. In truth, the FOB's operated much like the Alamo during its darkest days. Movement outside the FOB compounds was severely constrained due to the upsurge of Taliban activity throughout the country. You couldn't leave home unless you were dressed to the nines and armed to the teeth.

There were no hooches here and thank God for big favors. We were billeted in large tents with others of the camp. My bunkmates were a mix of active U.S. military enlisted and civilian contractors. Camaraderie and morale seemed to be good despite the harsh living conditions and the constant threat of insurgent attacks.

Someone put on a Johnny Mathias album to break the ice. Chances are I had remembered to bring a box of white Zinfandel with me because I was ready to lock and load. Sorry, that was an inappropriate description under the circumstances. I meant ready to rock and roll. Liquor flowed and tongues loosened and we were all good buds in a short time. That time seemed to exactly coincide with the fourth drink.

It'd been a long day and we were hungry, especially me. I felt my stomach lurch and heard it growl to be fed. We opened bags of MREs or *meals ready to eat* in military jargon. These contained a limited variety of freeze-dried foods of unimaginable quality and taste. They were the staple diet for soldiers in the field and for much of the Afghan population. They were generously doled out to the locals by the troops as part of our Food for Peace efforts. Each MRE packet also contained a small picture book to reach the hearts and minds of our Afghan friends.

The books used stick figures to get America's message to its illiterate subjects. Two figures were always prominently depicted in the booklets. One figure was a tall, Anglo-Saxon male holding an American flag in one hand and the Koran in the other. The other figure was always portrayed as a swarthy, Middle Eastern fundamentalist with a full beard wearing a long scimitar at his side. The locals could now distinguish friend from foe, but I suspected they already knew the difference.

The locals were smart in their own backward way though. They kept the matches, the plastic cutlery, pouches of water, the chocolate bars, and the nylons. They fed the rest of the bags contents to their goats. Eventually, concerns over the health of the goats led to a

warning label written in Farsi and Pashto. It clearly stated: "Too much U.S. propaganda could be hazardous to your health." But the goats couldn't read too well. However, to my knowledge, no product liability suits for choking to death ever arose. For the record, I had chicken Chow Mein with a cranberry juice chaser for dinner.

More drinks followed our feast and people started to open up about their lives and their pasts, especially the younger soldiers. Some of the stories spoke to the perils of fighting in foreign wars. Particularly poignant were the stories the men told of their war wounds they suffered in service to their beloved nation. Each story was more heartrending than the previous one. They would pull up their shirts or remove their pants to reveal nasty looking battle scars. The jagged lines on their skin and the deformities of bone, tissue, and muscle were horrendous to look at. These injuries had been received for protecting the freedom of other Americans and it was almost too much to bear.

My eyes moistened after hearing how they still suffered from their injuries. I turned away from the group several times to dab them dry. These men were real American heroes and men I could be proud to serve with. I was finally among my own element. After listening for almost an hour, I needed to share. More importantly, I needed to tell them I understood their anguish. I understood because I had been there. At that special place and time, we were all one in physical and emotional pain.

I finally broke down and told my story. It was difficult to tell since I had repressed this painful part of my past for many years, but it was time to share my ordeal with my

new kinsmen. It was my own personal badge of honor of sorts and my personal agony. I would show them the wound I had suffered during my military service. There would be no Purple Heart or commendation for bravery or gallantry because this wound was much too personal. It wouldn't be pretty, but at this point I needed to share my experience with my new comrades-in-arms.

It had all started in Indianapolis, the exciting capital of the state of Indiana in America's generous heartland. I was seventeen and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. My best buddies, Jeff and Eric, were of the same age and state of mind. We enjoyed partying and getting into trouble. Harmless hobbies were expensive and hard to come by in those days so we did a lot of drinking and drugging to keep us on the streets. We were just sowing our wild oats while we could still make hay. The scene didn't get any more prosaic or Midwestern than that.

We didn't commit anything more serious than a few B&Es and minor assaults on teachers. We'd never beat the crap out of our own teachers; we all desperately wanted to graduate and get the hell out of Indianapolis as soon as possible. As kids, we weren't really bad, just misunderstood and totally freaky. We had serious peer pressures to deal with while growing up in the early sixties. We had serious issues with being serious assholes too.

We decided to join the Navy and see the world. We liked the sound of that because it somehow had a familiar and comforting ring. Regardless, it would be exciting adventure. Oh my God, the stories we could tell our children when they reached the age of consent; if we could find them. We'd regale them with stories of our

many exploits in the various ports-of-call in the most exotic and morally corrupt cities in the Far East. Even then, we looked forward to explaining to them the directional differences between Caucasian and Asian women. It was simply a matter of latitude and attitude when you really looked at it.

We'd impart important cultural lessons and give a new slant on the meaning of life. It would be educational and rewarding. More importantly, we would be loving fathers bonding with their kids. Memory lane was always an easy stroll when you were young and mentally feeble.

Our judge agreed with our career choice and we went down to the main Navy recruiting station on Meridian Avenue on the day after our last court appearance. Our parents gladly gave us their permission to join since we were still too young to sign up on our own. That was odd when you thought about it. We could legally drive, masturbate (at least in private), have sex with girls our own age (also in private), get into R-rated movies and own an arsenal of lethal weapons. But we couldn't join the military though and lay down our lives for our country.

There was something very wrong with laws that thwarted those who aspired to protect, serve, and avoid jail time.

A few days later, we were sentenced to the Great Lakes Naval Training Facility, located north of Chicago. We settled into the routine fairly well for emotionally disturbed, rambunctious teens. The routine went like this: up at 5 am, shower, calisthenics, breakfast, close-order drills, Navy propaganda, lunch, more Navy propaganda, dinner, and then one hour of political indoctrination from our NCO commissar. This was immediately followed by

lights-out.

It was the same drill every day, but we went to church on Sundays to break the tedium and cleanse our souls. I sincerely beseeched Jesus to deliver me from this Hell hole. However, I now look back on those days with a certain fondness. My Navy tour led me to my career with DS with all its exciting travel adventures, cultural experiences, and opportunities for debauchery. My vocation and avocations merged into one fine lifetime venture.

Our training class finally received some leave, as in *by your leave my lord*—civilians called it time-off. We would directly head to the whorehouses in Waukegan and other cultural sites located close to the base. The houses catered to high-class U.S. Navy enlisted men and were a good source of revenue for the local economy. There was a certain economic elegance to the situation. In essence, it was a symbiotic and entrepreneurial relationship. The U.S. government supplied the sailors and the whores met the needs of demanding seamen. It was a good example of supply-side economics operating efficiently in the marketplace.

The houses were primarily staffed with Negro, colored, black, African American whores and their Negro, colored, black, African American pimps. We went to our favorite houses as often as possible, liberty allowing since we were hooked. And we spent our money like drunken sailors. In point of fact, we were drunken sailors. Jeff, Eric, and I were always broke and looking to our next allotment check to fund our obsession. We ended up working at one of the houses so we could continue our merriment. However, we were warned in no uncertain terms that there were no free lunches.

That didn't bother us since we got our meals free on base. It was still better than taking matters into our own hands. It got so bad that after awhile I started borrowing money from my classmates and later from the pimps at the whorehouses I frequented. My main cash cow was a guy called Arnie. I never learned his last name and I didn't want to know. Arnie would front me money to buy favors from his ladies. I didn't realize it at first, but I was getting into serious financial straits. His usurious loan terms were killing me: 35 percent interest each week. If I missed a repayment, he would tack on another ten percent penalty. Arnie made money from his girls. He made substantially more off his loan sharking business. It seemed I was once again in big trouble over my head.

Arnie was a dapper dresser who was always turned-out well. There was never a hair out of place or a shoe that needed shining. He was meticulous in his dress and manner. He was never vulgar or impolite with anyone from what I could tell; certainly not me, one of his best customers. He only wore the finest shark skin suits. I finally reached the point where I couldn't keep up with the principal much less the interest he was charging me to service the loan. Arnie was not pleased by this news. He calmly told me that I needed to come up with the rest of the money or else. I asked what he meant by *else*. He didn't reply; he just stared back at me with coal-black eyes that didn't have the slightest hint of compassion. They were dead eyes, predator eyes—shark eyes.

I ended up selling all my meager worldly goods and getting a loan from my parents. I gave everything to Arnie to satisfy my debt. He said I was still short several hundred dollars and had to pay up. I ultimately sold my civilian clothes and my Navy M-1 training rifle to raise

some cash. I didn't need the rifle anymore since I had aced the firearms qualifications earlier. If the Navy couldn't take a joke, well screw them. I still owed him another hundred or so when all was said and done. What Arnie said and did was neither kind nor pleasant. He was going to teach me a lesson in life I would never forget.

He and a couple of his fellow pimps took me aside one day and leaned me face-forward against a wall. Arnie proceeded to brutally hit me in the ass with a baseball bat. I remembered it was a Louisville Slugger, a number 18 weight, yellow pine bat. They aimed for my left buttocks and repeatedly hit me in the spot for the next thirty seconds or so but seemed like an eternity. That was where I kept my wallet. It was Arnie's little object lesson for a young kid who had welched on his debts.

It was nothing personal to him, just money. I had carried the scars of that beating to this day. Actually, he may have inadvertently done me a favor. In retrospect, it was really very white of him. The good news was Arnie's therapy session cured me of my obsession; however, I still left tight rolls of bills on my wife's pillow for several years. But she never bothered counting them knowing that she'd already been shortchanged.

I shared that story with my new friends and I held nothing back. To a man, they were emotionally moved by my story. Several gave me hugs to help me with my pain of reliving the experience. All expressed sorrow for what I had endured at the hands of the enemy of so many years ago. One young soldier even offered to give me his Army Distinguished Service Cross. He said I deserved it more than he did. He said that he couldn't wear it any longer, knowing how I had suffered for my nation. I politely declined, but I was deeply humbled by the whole

experience.

I composed myself since this was no time to show any signs of weakness in front of my strong compatriots. I then did what each had done before. I revealed to them my wound, my heartache, and my most intimate secret. I dropped my pants and bent over so all could clearly see my left buttock and the source of my dishonor. The cheek was clearly branded from the beating I went through by Arnie's hand.

The letters *CK* were boldly monogrammed on my butt cheek. I explained that the initials weren't those of a former girlfriend or Clark Kent. They were for Calvin Klein, a respected and successful businessman; an iconic figure and patriot. He too was a hero to all of us who strived to live the American dream of conspicuous consumption and unbridled corporate greed.

I would proudly wear those initials, that badge of dishonor, for the rest of my days. I could wear them longer if the cryogenics crap worked. I would be immortal, unless I froze my ass off first. Regardless, I would wear them with dignity and with my head held high. Initially, my new best buddies were dumbfounded, but extremely impressed by my story. It was my disclosure and, perhaps most of all, my exposure that tore at their collective psyches. It was all the more remarkable because the story was true and told from the heart. I have indelible, irrefutable proof and nobody can rebut the facts.

Sometimes survivors of Indianapolis did live to tell the tale of the shark attack. Many boys entered Great Lakes, but only one came out a man. Moreover, only one was destined to be a special agent of the Diplomatic Security Service, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Department of

State, United States of America. And that man was a Dick!

Sometimes those who served and protected had to put aside their humility in order to toot their own horns.

CHAPTER 12

A DICK GOES UNDER COVERS

Working undercover, especially in the drug trafficking business, was the most dangerous job a federal agent could have. It called for nerves of steel, a certain amount of chutzpah and a great deal of bravado—dumb luck helped too. It was also critical to choose a plausible persona and play a convincing role since your life and the lives of your colleagues were at stake. There absolutely couldn't be any missteps or screw-ups because the unpleasant consequences were just too great. You couldn't just cross your fingers and call *Kings X*. You

didn't get a second chance to get it right. As a UC, or undercover agent, you tried to maintain control of the situation as best you could with the hand you were dealt. But you were always playing the opposing team's game on its home field.

Sometimes those who served and protected tended to mix-up their games and metaphors.

I chose my persona and costume with great care and deliberation. I would play the role of the *consigliore* of a big-time, Chicago mafia family. I would be a powerful, imposing don and a major buyer of heroin. I was betting that the bad guys had never visited Chicago, especially in the winter since I planned to snow them. I also hoped they didn't understand Italian. I hoped they hadn't seen *The Godfather*—any of them. More importantly, I hoped they were the dumbest shits on the planet. I knew this was risky move, but it had to be done. We were innate risk-takers in DS and I needed to get inside this drug cartel to gain the confidence of the bad guys. Through them, I would find out what Tommy and his cohorts were up to before it was too late. It wasn't too late for me so I lit up another cigarette. Yes, I always smoked before being fucked-over. Rico Machisimo was my name and I was one very bad boy from Chi-town.

It was now time for Rico to get ready for the performance of his life. I had brought my charcoal gray suite and a stick of white chalk. I carefully applied vertical lines to the jacket and trousers. I chose a plain, dark black shirt and complemented it with a white tie. I took a Maybelline eyeliner pencil and drew an eight-inch line down my right cheek and made the scar look more convincing by crosshatching the line with tiny black

marks resembling poorly sewn stitches. I put on a huge pinkie ring and pushed wads of cotton between my gums and cheeks. I put on my highly buffed black wingtips with high heels. I needed extra stature tonight.

I had forgotten to bring socks and didn't have a fedora, so I improvised. I cut off the bill of my black DS ball cap and turned it inside out. If things went sour, I could always reverse the cap to reveal my embroidered gold shield with the letters DS. That might buy me some time as they recovered from the raw, virile authority my beanie projected. I placed a large poppy in my jacket lapel since I wanted to advertise that I was hip. Finally, I put on a pair of dark Ray-Bans and I was ready.

Well, I was almost ready. I tucked my Smith inside my black cummerbund. Thank God that Iver Johnson's revolvers had never really caught on. That would be too close for familial comfort. It would be a Dick pushing his *Johnson* into his crotch. That was too much information for my drawers. I wouldn't ever carry a Glock for the same reason.

I either looked like one very put-together Mafioso from the big city or a ninja warrior with poor dressing skills. With my cap, I might also resemble Spanky in the *Our Gang* comedy series. Regardless, I could play all characters with supreme confidence and equal aplomb.

My multiples would have to get off their lazy asses and work for a change. So what? After they finished, they could go back to arguing about who would emerge next. The bickering and backstabbing never ended. They needed to take a number and get a life. Frankly, I didn't care and I simply refused to pay them any mind. However, I prayed the bad guys would be suitably impressed and fooled. I finally felt safe and mellow after

swallowing a Xanax and a couple of Paxil, and some Viagra. I washed them down a large glass of wine; sorry, *vino, capisce?* I didn't know how I'd come out of this, but I wanted to cover all my base bases. Rex would be my backup tonight and Ahmed would drive.

Sometimes those who served and protected had to accept God's will and their own dumb luck in living their lives.

My new DEA friend, Craig Williams, arranged the meeting with the sheik through one of his Afghan informants. We drove to his residence without Joe and I was already feeling apprehensive. I didn't need anything else to make me jumpy. It was that uneasy feeling you get in the back of your head that something bad was going to happen. In my case, it was the queasy feeling in my stomach from the MREs the night before and I just couldn't shake it.

Rex and Ahmed dropped me two blocks from the sheik's house. I would walk the rest of the way while they took up positions outside. I was greeted at the door by two swarthy, burly, bearded guards. Fundamentally, they looked okay, but you never could be sure *in extremis* or Afghanistan. I was duck-walked to a room on the first floor and kept watch by them.

The room was large and had a high ceiling with gilded moldings. A massive chandelier was centered directly above card tables pushed together to create one large conference table. Banks of computers, telephones, fax machines, and copiers lined one entire wall. Highly detailed maps of the region were hanging on the wall. I suspected they showed the locations and status of the poppy crops that they owned or controlled. I wasn't

certain since I couldn't read any dialects of poppy. But they were astute businessmen by the looks of it. I would have to be on my toes, but that was easy given my high heels. I waited by carefully pacing the room, although in actuality I was calculating the distance between the conference table and the door. I did that in case I needed to make a quick exit. Advance planning and split-second timing were everything in this business. And I'd always been good at taking a powder; heroin or otherwise.

Sheik Abdullah bin Abdullah Mohammed y Mohammed entered the room surrounded by many goons. I decided to simply call him *sheik*. It wasn't quite proper or chic, but it was economical. He was a commanding figure dressed in a dazzling white robe. He wore a full *kaffiyeh* headdress and a pair of dark Ray-Bans as well. There would be no eye contact tonight between us. Our eyes were the windows to the soul and I'd just lost one of the best means of distinguishing lie from truth. I would now have to rely on my gut instincts. I was very worried since I'd already puked my guts.

The sheik had a stern frown on the part of his face I could see. That was not a good sign. He approached me and stuck his arms straight in front of him. He then made a loud *ratta tat tat, ratta tat tat* sound. He swept his arms back and forth about a half-dozen times, to the laughter of the room. Chicagoans are often welcomed this way overseas by ignorant, violence obsessed foreigners; however, it was never done on Valentine's Day out of love for our quaint, heartfelt customs. He doubled over in laughter. I knew then that my disguise was wholly convincing and I had just passed the ultimate litmus test for anyone born or raised in the city. I was now in the loop.

I graciously presented him with my gift and held it out for him to take. It was a bottle of Boone's Farm wine I bought at the embassy concessionaire. I told him it was my own label that I had bottled at the family winery in Central Illinois. The impressive gold foil enclosing its neck was a special touch. Giving him a box of wine would have been a tacky and distasteful offering; besides, it was a too expensive gift for a sleazy guy like sheik. I winked and darkly hinted that there were more than grape roots planted underground. He gravely laughed at my morbid and moribund sense of humor.

I figured I had to lay it on thick to bolster my credibility by asserting that my outfit was personally responsible for the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa. We had dumped his body into a concrete footing during the construction of the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington. It was not only the perfect hiding spot, it was ironic piece of wet-work and Jimmy was now a pillar of the community. The sheik shot me an odd, but knowing glance. I was now a made guy. Unfortunately, I didn't know if that meant I'd been outed or simply one of the boys.

Alcohol was forbidden by Muslim custom and law, but I knew something about Islamic laws and customs. They only applied to devout Muslims while in their own countries. Once onboard a flight to New York or Paris, off would come the caftans covering the Seville Row suits. The booze was always plentiful and free in First Class. However, they were pious enough to wait until the plane left their country's airspace. Once in New York, these guys would party like it was 1999.

After a week in the Big Apple, I would escort the ranking dignitaries to JFK airport for their flights home. Many, however, wanted to get in some last licks and

would bring high-priced call girls along for the ride. The women were experts in foreign relations; through the rearview mirror, I had watched several of them service heads of state. I was always envious of their power and money, but not the dignitaries, only the call girls. By the way, I never got tipped or otherwise comped for protecting and serving others on those security details.

It was now the sheik's turn for gift giving. The traits of Arab hospitality and cordiality are world renowned and practiced to a fault in the Middle East. To do so is a custom, a duty and a way of life. The guest was always treated as a sheik and a host would first lay down his own daughter to protect a visitor to his home. No harm or embarrassment could ever come to those safely ensconced in the home of a true believer.

To allow such things would be out of the question—blasphemy. The host would suffer excruciating loss of honor to himself, his immediate family, blood kinsmen, and to Allah himself. It was a lot like Lot's daughter. You couldn't be gang-raped inside a host's home. You had to be thrown into the street first. Only then could the crowd get to know you better. At that moment, I empathized with Lot's daughter, but I didn't feel the same about his wife. She wasn't worth her salt, as far as I was concerned. Women always had to get the last word and look.

The sheik's gift was a magnificent scimitar and scabbard. Its ancient blade gleamed like a thousand suns magnified a hundred times. In other words, it was bright and it hurt my eyes when I looked at it directly and my Ray-Bans came in handy. I cut my finger on the scabbard as I examined this most thoughtful and generous gift. I barely could make out the *USA* imprint on its hilt next to a

huge scarab. How come I never got gifted with the good stuff from Japan? I profusely thanked my host and did the Thai greeting thing to express my sincerity. There were no cultural barriers between men of the world.

At that point, one of sheik's bodyguards moved to search me. I had expected this and stopped him short. I slowly opened my jacket and removed my Smith revolver from my cummerbund. I purposefully placed it on the table in front of everyone to show that I had strength and confidence in myself. In other words, the act showed them I had balls. They reciprocated by dropping their AK-47s, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and other weapons of mass destruction on the table. They held onto the rocket launchers just to be safe. That showed they had much bigger balls.

The sheik served us hot tea and we finally got down to business. I sat in a chair with my back to the window. The sheik sat directly opposite to me at the far end of the table. Without ceremony or preamble, we began negotiating price. It was set by quantity, quality and market demand. If the price wasn't good, I would feign looking disappointed and hurt. I would make puppy-dog eyes to see if I could score a deep discount. However, everything was quoted in *keys*. It was keys this, keys that. I was a bit confused, thinking I was there to do a heroin buy. I finally picked up on the language difference and started adding up the cost of the deal. I usually had my State Department idiot savant on me to crunch the numbers, but I had to rely on my pocket calculator instead. After a couple of minutes, I told the sheik things added up for me and now he had my number.

I was then brought three egg cups filled with product. Each cup held a demitasse spoon and I was in my own

element. They wanted me to taste and test their wares so I wetted my pinkie, dipped it into the bowl and dabbed my tongue. I next scooped up some of the white substance with the spoon and brought it to my nose. With a spare finger, I pressed one nostril closed. I then took a snort of the powerfully intoxicating product. We had been taught how to inhale various narcotics in agents' class. That particular piece of curriculum scored high marks on our evaluations.

The sheik and his men anxiously awaited my judgment. I boldly announced that it was too cold. I then did the same with the next cup and told them it was too hot. I pronounced the third cup just right. They must have been relieved I wasn't staying the night. They looked at each other in bewilderment. That either meant I'd successfully passed their test or I was in big trouble. I kicked back in my chair and propped both feet on the table. It was exceedingly rude, but it showed that I was one confident dude or dud depending on the outcome of my visit.

I pulled a Cuban Monte Cristo cigar from my jacket pocket and lit it. I realized it was a big-time breaking of federal law, but I didn't care. We're good at pushing papers and envelopes in DS, but we're never stationary for long. That's when it happened and I was in big trouble. The goon next to me grabbed a kilo bag of heroin off the table and smacked me across the face; it smarted. It also broke open the bag and sent about two pounds of fine powdered heroin flying through the air. The room looked like a Currier and Ives print of a snowy Christmas day. Santa, his sleigh, and reindeer were merrily perched on the gabled roof of Grandma's house in the countryside. I quickly deduced that I was in a winter-

wonderland of hurt. I greatly worried about the slay part of the picture.

The goon who had hit me with the smack stood behind my chair so I couldn't escape. Things were very tense for a minute, but then, remarkably, we all mellowed out. The situation didn't feel all that threatening now and we even joked about the Bears' preseason opener. I had finally achieved the profound state of serenity and happiness I had been seeking. I was in a bodacious, Bedouin bordello with the most agreeable bunch of camel jockeys one could hope to meet. I now comprehended the meaning of life itself. However, I didn't have a clue what to do with that bit of trivia. I felt like one very content caterpillar in a cozy cocoon. I was never going to leave because I was no damn butterfly.

Of course, it was all an act on my part. Over the years in the department I had built up an incredible immunity to all things pleasurable, vile, and noxious. I wasn't about to be thrown by a little horse. But I had to take that powder I mentioned fast since I had been found out. I needed to hit the road Jack and get out of Dodge stat. *Stop it this minute, Avery*, I said to myself. Instead, I had to exit the building in a safe and orderly manner as we're taught in department fire drills.

I reached out with my right arm and aimed it and the laser pointer I had secreted inside my jacket sleeve, directly at the sheik's forehead. His geldings gasped and pointed at his face. The sheik now realized he was in my sight and on the spot. I told him that my compatriot outside the window had focused his rifle's laser scope on his forehead. He was a crack shot, especially pleased when he got the shakes. The sheik would be dead before his body hit the floor. I readily admitted that I enjoyed

shooting my cuffs from time to time.

I ordered the sheik and his men to stay perfectly still for the next ten minutes or else. I suggested that *else* could mean stuffing uncooked Bob Evans pork links down their *halal* gullets. That would give me plenty of time to get the hell out of there. However, my prearranged signals with Rex somehow had gotten mixed up. It must have been a language problem. That didn't jibe though since we both had passed the department's ESL test with more-or-less respectable scores.

At that very moment, the door flew open and two flash-bang stun grenades came rolling into the room. I immediately understood the consequences and took quick, evasive action by bending over and kissing my ass goodbye. That was DS-speak for curling in a tight ball, closing your eyes, and putting your hands over your ears. Sucking one's thumb was optional. I did so just a second ahead of the explosion. The sheik and his men were shocked and stunned beyond belief. I was slightly concussed from the blasts so Rex took my arm and guided me out of the house.

We rode back to the FOB in complete silence. Our actions spoke louder than any cuss words. In DS, we never use the word *bust* in polite company. It could be easily misconstrued to mean a woman's breast, an arrest, or, in this case, an utterly miserable failure.

Sometimes those who served and protected parsed their words very precisely to avoid any misinterpretation or recrimination.

CHAPTER 13

DANGEROUSLY COBBLED TOGETHER

Danger! Danger! Danger! Those and other alarming words blared from the loudspeaker above my bed. It was 7:15 in the morning and this was not a drill. I hurriedly rolled out of bed and under it. We were instructed to proceed to our assigned shelters: ASAP or sooner. I quickly dressed and padded down the path with my fellow zombies and sheltered from the announcement's incessant ear-ringing noise. I hadn't had my first cigarette of the day with my shave and I was terribly grumpy.

We quickly learned what was going on outside. A

Foreign Service National employee had driven her car into the main entrance inspection portal as usual. She and other locals were permitted to park on the compound. The *rotten apple* scenario was the embassy's greatest worry. This was the one where the *apple* turned out to be a Taliban sympathizer or, much worse, a Mujahideen warrior. The *barrel* was the embassy compound. At the bottom of the barrel was the *applesauce*: the embassy staffers.

Per standard procedure, all vehicles had to undergo a thorough inspection before entering the compound proper. Moreover, the employees' backgrounds were checked as best possible under the circumstances prior to employment. However, the record checks and interview processes were largely illusory and cursory, despite the embassy's best efforts. It was hit or miss proposition at best when hiring local staff. Taliban polling ledgers were hard to come by.

In her case, the alarm bells went off when the guards swabbed her vehicle for the presence of explosive substances. Several swabs were taken thinking it could be a false-positive reading. But each time one came back positive. There was no doubt that the vehicle was carrying explosives and the area was quickly sealed off. It was very possible that she was totally unwitting since someone could have secreted explosives in her car without her knowledge.

The sniffer dogs were brought to locate the likely location of the explosive device. The Taliban exercised great initiative and imagination in constructing and planting IEDs or improvised explosive devices. There were roadside IEDs (RIEDs), body-borne IEDs (BBIEDs), vehicle born IEDs (VBIEDs), and airborne IEDs

(ABIEds). These acronyms were variously pronounced as “reds,” “A-beds,” “V-beds” and “Ab-beds.”

These were highly effective, deadly terrorist devices and they certainly scared people out of their own beds. Afghan women actually enjoyed walking ten paces (or farther) behind their husbands. In any event, people needed to watch their steps here.

We asked each newcomer to give us the latest skinny. We didn't get breakfast and we were hungry and nervous. I had to go to the bathroom several times, but always left the fan running. About an hour later, we received the all-clear signal. It turned out there was no explosive device aboard her car. She, like every other driver in Kabul, had picked up explosives residue in the wheel wells and on the tires of her vehicle. There were so many bombings in the city that one couldn't avoid it. It was an endemic epidemic. In any event, another terrorist act was stopped dead in its tracks. Life's little routines quickly returned to the embassy and I went to breakfast. Later that day, RSO Larry Bumpkiss ordered that, henceforth, all Afghan employees must park their cars in the vacant lot next to the chancery compound. He instructed the quislings to line-up their vehicles in neat fifth columns for ease of observation by the security staff.

After a late breakfast, I checked on Fred. He hadn't let out a peep during the night and that was a good thing. I watered him and cleaned up the carcasses of several unidentifiable furry animals. It was disgusting work, but it had to be done. *I had a demanding schedule and really should have someone else look out for his well-being,* I thought.

Spare time weighed heavily on the American staffers

at the embassy. One could only get laid and/or drunk so many times a week before the prostate or liver started bitching up a storm. Poker was a popular time-killer among the inmate population and there was a game going on somewhere on the compound around-the-clock. The big winners left with their scoot-loot in shopping bags. They not only had bragging rights, but they now could afford a continental breakfast at the cafeteria.

Money, real and otherwise, was plentiful here. One couldn't even spend the twenty-five dollar per diem allowance. A full meal was about four bucks and cheap wine sold for about five bucks a bottle. Marlboro cigarettes, either light or red, were ten dollars a carton. It was an ideal place for the food, alcohol, and nicotine addicted with little money or willpower. Many people were delighted to be here. Like West Virginia, it was almost heaven, but only for those with very perverted senses of humor.

There were other, less costly ways to while away the time while waiting for a commutation of sentence. Foreign Service officers could dial directly from their room phones to the greater Washington, DC area for free. It was a terrific benefit that never was abused because people feared the privilege would be taken away. You would get a special dial tone and be able to directly call anyone in the local area codes. With a calling card, you could call farther locations, as if calling from Washington instead of Kabul. However, the department automatically blocked many numbers. Invariably, these were the mental health crisis lines, the Alcoholics Anonymous 800 number, lawyers specializing in all manner of workplace harassment, and the American Foreign Service Association—the officers' union.

However, the more enterprising and frugal Foreign Service officers could easily bypass the blocks. They would call free to the department's female operators manning the phone banks around-the-clock on behalf of their country and a steady paycheck with good health benefits. The State Department still employed real, live telephone operators. However, to demonstrate its technological prowess and savvy, it forced its operators to speak through voice synthesizers. When you reached an operator, you were always greeted by Darth Vader on steroids. The department prided itself for always being on the following edge of the latest technology.

The operators were sweethearts though. You'd tell them you were in Afghanistan or Timbuktu or wherever and ask to be patched into an outside line. They would always oblige knowing that the call would be for official business only. It had to be so. It was axiomatic. It was a government official using a government telephone, through a government switch, over a government-leased line, from a government facility, to a government operator in a government building located in the seat of government. Lastly, the calls were monitored by the governments of Russia, China, and the United States. Fortunately, governance was never a big issue in the department.

The officer would always hook up with Brandi, Sandi, Randi, Bruce or one of his other girlfriends. They would talk for hours about undying loves, the heartaches of separation, and strong desires for intimacy and copulation. The conversations were so passionate and intense that they ultimately led to multiple orgasms—at least on the part of the Foreign Service officers. This greatly eased the stress caused by long separations from

loved ones and the perils of working in a war zone.

All of the calls had happy endings and there were never any arguments or harsh words uttered during these highly charged dialogues. They were always sincere, friendly and loving as such calls between close partners should be. By sheer coincidence, all of their girlfriends lived in the same 900 area code. For the women, it was extreme passion by the billable second—they always got off handsomely with Uncle Sam. I never did such things since I have too much integrity to put myself on the line that way. Anyway, I liked my sex offline without a department operator listening.

Ali Akbar was a weasel Pathan from a province located just outside of Kabul. He intercepted me near the embassy snack bar later that afternoon as I was getting my third cup of cappuccino. I liked all things American. I meant the coffee, not Ali. He sold carpets and tchotchkes each Wednesday at the embassy bazaar. I had seen him around, but hadn't paid any attention since he was a little person of no consequence. I tried to be very discriminating in my job. In this instance I was wrong—he was little, but, as I'd find out later, he had consequence.

Ali spoke passable English for a foreigner and we could easily communicate without the sign language nonsense. My arthritic fingers ached after speaking too long. My dignity ached after speaking too long as well. He told me his lifelong dream was to visit Las Vegas before he died, but without his wives. He said it was Allah's will, but I suspected it was Ali's fondness for gambling, boozing and whoring. Sometimes life destinies converged at the most opportune times.

He said the climates of Vegas and Kabul were similar

and so were the cities' rich historical and cultural attractions. They also had the same number of letters in their names so it was good karma, astrologically speaking. There was just one teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy problem: Ali had no scoots to pay for his junket. He was a consistent loser at the Kabul mahjongg tables. All of his hard-earned scoots scooted out of his pockets as soon as they landed there. His wives were furious and threatened to reverse their clitoridectomies if he didn't stop gambling. The gambit didn't work. In any case, it would be no skin off his nose, he asserted, since he had stopped having sex with them many years before.

Ali said he had an offer I couldn't refuse. I didn't like the tone of the statement since it was too trite and overworked. He said that for a reasonable stipend, he could help me with my investigation. There were no jungle drums in Afghanistan, only tribal ones. He was wired into his Pathan brothers who knew everyone and every secret in Kabul. He told me he knew who was ripping off the U.S. government and had a general idea how they did it. I already had enough on Tommy and his cohorts and probably didn't need the additional information Ali was offering me. But it didn't hurt to put another bullet through their greedy heads. We were taught to be meticulous about our dress and work habits.

Neither Ali nor I knew at the time what he knew had consequences far beyond the contract shenanigans I had unraveled. He spent the next thirty minutes or so educating me on the finer points of the drug trade in Afghanistan. After listening to his story, I vowed to be more careful playing in such dangerous traffic. Ali told me to follow my nose and the money. I wondered then if he was a DS agent working deep-cover and doing time for

some youthful indiscretion. He concluded the conversation by putting a price tag on his civic-mindedness.

I'd just recruited my first CI, or confidential informant, of the case. They're never called Benedict Arnolds or Judases or similar pejorative, but highly historical names. To do so would be demeaning and unprofessional. Besides, the department typically doesn't learn from history. That was merely something from the past and best forgotten since it won't happen again. Who wants to be reminded of unpleasant things? The department preferred to use rat, fink, grass, turncoat, or similar terms of endearment because they had little historical motif or significance.

Co-opting my first CI was an important step in looking like I knew what I was doing. I emailed Dan Sykes with a summary of my meeting with Ali "Rat Fink" Akbar and his demand for payment. Dan agreed that they were reasonable demands under the circumstances. The IG would draw the money from a slush fund it kept for such exigencies. I would handle the rest of the payment through the embassy. I assigned Ali the code of CI-A, indicating that he was the first. If this bit of sensitive information inadvertently fell into enemy hands, I could easily lay things off on the embassy's station. They were much better at plausible denial than me.

One persistent problem among federal law enforcement and counterintelligence organizations was trying to determine whether the CI designator was currently in use or had been used in the past. Much time was spent Googling the letters and their many permutations to make certain that there could be no hint of plagiarism afoot. The agencies had to set the example

for all law abiding Americans. In DS headquarters, a dyslexic clerk named Anna Graham handled all requests from other federal agencies. We were fully committed to obeying both the spirit and letter of the law.

I pulled up *Craigslis*t for Kabul and searched under "CIA." Not surprisingly, there weren't any hits. Everyone already knew where those folks worked and lived. It was no big secret here because half the city was on its payroll and the other half wished they were. I had to be careful not to overly recruit since I only had twenty-five other letters to work with. In other words, *a snitch in time saves nine*, as my erstwhile colleagues rarely say. Obviously, we didn't do things by the number in DS.

Ali was asking for three wishes to be granted: braces for his wives mouths, twenty-two thousand dollars in cash, and a single-entry visa for him to the US of A. I was to be his genial genie and we haggled over the details. It was expected and perfunctory drama between a shrewd Arab bargainer and a fussy, stingy government official. Uncle Sam took it in the shorts, as usual, but I now had a CI.

Sometimes those who served and protected found it more profitable to inform than to confess.

I must confess that I had to confess. It was now Sunday and I needed to dump the emotional garbage I'd collected while in Kabul. Old habits of priests and nuns never die; they just fade, wrinkle and disintegrate over time. By the way, I was raised a nondenominational, lapsed Catholic. With my religious training, I could seamlessly lapse into other faiths when my needs required it. But I was sure I'd pay dearly later for those lapses in judgment.

I had been told that there were no Catholic churches left in the city after Taliban rule, so I decided to walk to the nearest mosque about three blocks from the embassy. Jesus, isn't a house of God, a house of God? I knew I was breaking embassy security rules, but figured no one would dare attack me on the Sabbath. While walking, I wondered why everyone on this planet wasn't a Catholic. God knows the holy Church had tried its best. What other religious faith absolves one so easily and frequently of immortal sins? You go into the batter's box and you say you're sorry and ask for forgiveness. You do some penance and then go out to carouse with a fresh, clean soul.

Even with three strikes you were not out with the biggest sin-eater in the universe. You ended up doing more penance and repenting for not repenting for what you should have repented for before. I removed my shoes and crossed myself before entering the mosque. I was met by the mullah, but I didn't quite get his name when he introduced himself so I simply called him mullah. It seemed logical because foreigners fully appreciated the fact that Americans just didn't have an ear for the local dialects. We simply couldn't pick up the foreign gibberish due to our advanced state of xenophobia.

I explained to Father Mullah why I was there by telling him that the mosque was a place of worship and I needed my infernal soul washed, dried and permed. I mentioned I wasn't Muslim, but didn't hold that against him or his people. I wanted him to understand it wasn't anything personal. In fact, I told him that under different circumstances, I might deign to consider him an equal and a fellow human being. Fortunately, his English wasn't too swift, but he was kind and generous to a fault with

this stranger standing in his midst and mosque. However, he said he didn't know how to perform the rites of communion and confession. I assured him that it wouldn't be a problem because I still remembered the drill.

Well, I more-or-less recalled the catechisms and rituals so I immediately assumed the lotus position. I'd brought some Zinfandel, Ritz crackers and my sack of sins with me and we got through the communion part without a hitch. I quietly hummed a few bars of *Kumbaya* while enjoying my snack. I couldn't remember all the hums, so I winged a few. I didn't offer the mullah anything to eat or drink. I knew it was against his religion to take candy from a baby or sustenance from the mentally challenged.

I then asked him to bless me by rapidly tapping my forehead twice, three times. I kept saying "Who's there?" He never answered. It seemed that Muslim clerics had little sense of humor, when you got right down to it. I wasn't certain if communion came before confession because I had never picked up the timing of such things the couple of times I attended Mass—*mea culpa and kumbaya*.

Now it was time for confession and I instructed mullah to turn his back to me. I explained that sins couldn't be revealed to a priest or a mullah who was laughing in a parishioner's face. It just wasn't Christian. He did so not having a clue what we were doing. I freely confessed that I had shaved my per diem allowance in Delhi and stolen the crackers from the cafeteria. I was almost finished unburdening myself when the unthinkable was thought.

One of my multiples emerged before I could put him back in his place. I believed it was Barney, my troubled teen other. It figured since he was such a loser and misfit. He'd always tried to instigate trouble with the

others. However, I couldn't be positive since they tended to constantly step on each others' tongues. It was a constant state of bedlam in a crowded Tower of Babel. The tower was home to a bunch of overly verbal manic personas with advanced Tourette's. Regardless of who was at fault, I blamed Barney anyway.

Sometimes those who served and protected needed to be a strict disciplinarian with others.

Barney blurted out to Mullah that I had eaten pork and Irena in the same week. Thank God he didn't suggest I'd porked her too because that would have been way too much information. There was a mocking joy in his raspy voice and I was so furious that I could have killed him on the spot, but I decided to bide my time. "Revenge is best served cold" as we rarely said in DS circles. I'd later bitch slap him silly for the malicious gaffe. Others would suffer the same fate if they gave me any guff. I strictly controlled my emotions, regardless of the sources. When push came to shove, it was all about self-discipline.

Father Mullah was wise beyond his eighty plus years. He pondered what I, Barney, or whoever, had just disclosed to him and Allah. God knows no one would have been the wiser if Barney hadn't blabbed. After a very long intermission, the mullah spoke in a strong, commanding voice and his words were sage and comforting. He proclaimed that the Koran strictly forbade the eating of pork. This law was in full consonance with the faith's strict dietary laws. Pigs were unclean animals with hooves like the devil. It was *harram*, or forbidden, in the Muslim religion.

As to Irena, he didn't see a problem. Pussy was not *harram* as long as it was sheared, cleansed, and

worshiped before eaten. *I had just aced the test*, I thought. I confessed I enjoyed shaving Irena, despite her complaining about stubble burns on her *mons veneris*. I was delighted though and revealed I was a Taurus who got off on dirty, planetary pillow talk. I didn't even mind if she lip synched the words. I enjoyed lip reading, especially using Braille. Luckily, Barney hadn't mentioned the clit ring. That would have been blasphemous. Devout Muslim women were never allowed to put jewelry or anything else of value from their husbands into any of their orifices since it was most definitely *haram*. The practice was wholly and holey inconceivable in their religion and it was considered a most egregious act of blasphemy.

Thank Allah I was off the skyhook of eternal damnation. Maybe this Muslim religious fundamentalist stuff wasn't so threatening after all. I was now a believing, nonbeliever, infidel atheist; Hallelujah, Lord. I promised Father Mullah that I would do penance for the per diem and crackers *sin-lettes* by lighting three candles the next time the electricity went out in my room. He told me that electricity was an outdated ritual in much of Kabul these days.

Sometimes those who served and protected were of differing minds when it came to religious intolerance, unoriginal sins, and speaking in foreign tongues.

Ali Akbar met me couple of days later at a prearranged off-campus venue. I didn't want to be seen with him if I could help it. He was an inferior person, but he was still my first CI. I had to treat him with some respect, as much as it galled me to do so. The *needs of the service* dictum took over again and I was on autopilot. After I told him we

had a deal blessed by Washington, he revealed all of Tommy's operation. Ali was convinced that Tommy was a big-time dealer in opium. He backed up his claim with facts, figures, and the finer points of the drug business in Afghanistan.

He told me Tommy played the Afghan futures market (AFM) in raw opium. He and others essentially bet whether the price of opium would go up or down. Tommy would snap-up options to buy through the AFM. If he played the game long and the price went up, he would walk away with a handsome profit. If he played it long and the price went down, he'd exercise his contract and would arrange to process the opium locally into raw heroin. He'd smuggle the stuff out of the country and sell it to the big refiners and distributors elsewhere. He couldn't lose either way and he was fast becoming one rich Brit.

Ali also told me his Pathan bros had stumbled across Tommy Thompson and his group of merry men a few weeks earlier. They had observed Tommy driving to a middle-of-nowhere plateau outside of Kabul. There, Tommy and his cohorts sat around a large campfire, staying at the site for a couple of hours before returning to town. Ali didn't know why they were meeting, but speculated American scouting traditions had now been successfully transplanted in Afghanistan. He thought we Americans were really prolific exporters of all things wholesome and morally healthy. My mind quickly flashed on his proposed trip to Vegas.

However, I was skeptical about the conclusion. There had to be a better, more plausible explanation for what was going on in total isolation and desolation. Ali then gave me what I had wanted to hear. He had learned

through his fellow herdsmen that Tommy's group was planning to meet the next night. I would be prepared for Tommy's next move, I hoped.

Sometime those who served and protected had to sleep on their troublesome conundrums.

CHAPTER 14

THE STICKY PLOT CONGEALS

I discreetly tailed Tommy Thompson from his room to his car that was parked outside in the lot designated for the locals. I signaled Ahmed and Rex who were waiting in Rashid's taxi down the block just as he pulled away. We followed Tommy on a circuitous route through the city. It was obvious that he was trying to shake any tails. Rashid was a better offensive and defensive driver than DS could ever hope to train at Bob Bonderant's School of High Performance Driving in Arizona. He had learned the tricks of his trade by navigating the streets of Kabul when

he was knee-high to a Datsun. Rashid could easily negotiate every nook, cranny, crevice and crevasse the city could throw at him. We had no trouble keeping up with Tommy, despite his feeble attempts to ditch us in traffic. It was obvious that Rashid had been around the block many times before.

Tommy finally pulled onto a dirt road about four miles outside the city. We gave him plenty of sway since we didn't want to be discovered. He finally stopped and we did too, about a hundred yards away. I immediately ordered Rashid and Ahmed to cover the taxi in camel, sheep and goat droppings: the only commodities not rationed in Afghanistan. They looked at me as if I was crazy, but Rex and I understood the need for stealth and camouflage so that the car would blend in with the rest of the crap nearby. They would later thank me for my kindness after they shaped the dung into small patties to burn as fuel for their campfires and stoves. Afghans routinely did this when their chips were down.

I instructed Rashid and Ahmed to hold their noses and stay with the car, but only the trained professionals would venture further. Rex and I crept very quietly to a nearby hillock to get a good view. Rex took up a position well behind me to watch my butt. I could see Tommy open his car trunk and put on his black burka and nikab. The other four people standing close by were identically dressed in similar garb. We couldn't make out who was who, who was who, who was who, who was who or who was who. We also didn't know what lay beneath their burkas, but we had a pretty good guess since we both had to take PE in school.

They built a large bonfire with wood they had brought with them and sat in a tight circle, opening up the picnic

basket someone had thoughtfully remembered to bring. They removed bottles of wine, varieties of cheese, and water crackers. The group drank and ate for the next hour. Brie and Camembert were freely passed around from one to another as if it were some pagan ritual. I couldn't hear what they were saying because I was much too far away.

I had forgotten to bring my parabolic microphone and I chewed Rex out later for that mistake. That was the way it was done between a senior and junior in the organization. It was about being a mentor, a good shepherd to the young and foolish. In reality, I was Rex's big brother. I eventually heard one woman giggle. At least I thought it was a woman, but I couldn't be positive after so many years in the Foreign Service.

As I watched, I heard a rustling noise some distance behind me. I knew there were few cattle in Afghanistan so I wondered what the hell was going on. But I quickly learned that Rex had bush-whacked two bad guys coming onto our position. If he hadn't acted so quickly and decisively, we both could've been drinking wine and nibbling some Roquefort around the campfire below. Sometimes we needed to hold our breath and count to ten before acting precipitously in imminently dangerous situations. Actually, Rex didn't bush-whack them. That would have been too noisy and would have drawn unwanted attention.

Instead, he had quietly garroted the shit out of them. The sand Chiggers were dead before their flaccid bodies dropped to the ground. Chiggers were high-priced Afghan assassins, kidnappers and extortionists for hire. They skulked, scuttled, and skedaddled along the countryside in complete safety and obscurity. They

reveled in the knowledge that they were untouchable. They truly represented the brutish *crème-de-la-crème* of this ruthless, godless country—mite really did count for something in these parts. I admired Rex—he was very, very good at his job.

I knew a DS board of inquiry would be convened when we got home to look into the unfortunate accident. I'd back Rex a thousand percent as big brothers do. I had been through that court of kangaroos before. I always raised my right hand and swore on the *DS Instructions & Procedures Manual* to tell the truth and only the truth, so help me Pinocchio. I would stick to my well-rehearsed story, since no sort of deviation was permitted in the organization.

I would again be a bull dog with lockjaw. I would compose and depose myself and say I hadn't seen a thing. As taught, I had tightly circle my wagons a distance away from Rex and hadn't been in the loop—couldn't even see the Loop—I really wasn't born in Chicago either. What was a loop? Invariably, the board would accept my loopy, but loquacious story. That would be the end of things, well not quite. I'd nominate Rex for DS's Award for Heroism with two oak leaf clusters for his bravery this night.

What Rex and I next saw amazed us. The group gathered around the bonfire and held hands. They walked counterclockwise in slow circles and chanted something like "I'm in the money; I don't mean honey, ka-ching, ka-ching a ling." I probably misheard given the shifting desert winds. This bizarre activity was most definitely weird and cultist. I glanced over at Rex and we couldn't believe our own eyes or ears. I asked him if I had put too much oregano on my pasta last night at the

embassy cafeteria. One of the disciples pulled on a rope that raised a twenty foot high cross with an enormous dollar sign attached to it. They lit the sign and flames immediately engulfed this most American symbol of our country's might for all to see. It shone brightly in the night sky and we gasped in shock.

We were in the midst of unbridled, avaricious capitalists who could never make the cover of *Fortune* even if their lives depended on it. They were openly worshiping the Almighty Buck with wanton abandon. I can't speak to faces, but the cross had greed written all over it. Then I noticed a fatal flaw in the design of the massive dollar sign. I was a stickler for detail and currency. It had two vertical lines running through the S instead of one. This strongly suggested that these loonies were either uneducated foreigners or had read too many Scrooge Mc Duck comic books. The British, in particular, used funny spellings on their currency. It was too confusing to think about, but it wasn't a good sign in any case.

This unnerving ceremony ended with the slaughtering of a fatted calf. It had been mooing mournfully in the foreground since it fully understood it was beyond its prime. The cows had finally come home for this soon-to-be sacrificed heifer. In other words, the brave bovine was dead meat! Ok, I was having trouble describing the anguish and angst the beast felt. The prose may have been purple, but the results of the act were blood-red.

The poor animal's final moments were spent in morose silence knowing it was going to die in this godless, Afghan open-air abattoir. Animals weren't necessarily dumb because they couldn't speak. They were just terribly shy and tongue-tied, especially while being

slaughtered. Eventually, the cow took a header and I'll spare you the gory details of its deathly demise. But the whole scene was a grisly, gristly downer. The image would be flash seared into my memory forever. Maybe I would become a vegan after all.

The robed figures next dipped their fingers into its warm innards. With the animal's blood, they drew dollar signs on each other's foreheads, but they still insisted on placing two vertical strokes through the S. I was so furious with their penmanship that I could have screamed bloody murder or something equally naughty. Instead, I held my breath and stamped my feet because I was having a full-blown hissy fit over their careless behavior.

The ritualistic killing didn't appear to include any halal or kosher artifices so I assumed it was righteous Christian meat and therefore edible and safe to eat by agnostics and atheists alike. That was good news for Rex and I since neither of us had had a good sirloin steak tartar in some time. My thoughts of eating an uncooked steak were simply too much to ignore. My stomach growled at the thought. Of course, any leftovers would be donated to the locals. I'd probably pass on my idea of becoming a vegan anytime soon.

I rendered up a silent prayer to St. Butcher, the patron saint of processed deli meats, to deliver this stout animal's rump roasts and flank steaks to the starving children of Afghanistan. I immediately felt the warmth of celestial love. My better angels do come to the fore on special occasions. What we just witnessed was a combination of very powerful juju and very bad table manners. I hoped I still had my Mojo on and remembered to bring serviettes.

Each congregant left in his or her car after about

twenty minutes of enthusiastic prancing and chanting. All of the cars, except one, were white Toyota Corollas, the most ubiquitous transportation in Afghanistan—next to the camels and donkeys. The muddy license plates made it impossible to capture tag numbers. The non-Corolla was a black Lexus sedan flying the personal flag of the U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission from its left front fender. Its red diplomatic plate read: *U.S. Embassy-2*. I'd follow up tomorrow on these subtle clues—I would most positively draw a nexus to the Lexus.

I would quickly identify the Marine security guard who had been joyriding in Ambrose Pierce's car and break him or her through unrelenting interrogation or sweet talk. I'd find out who else was involved in this cabal in Kabul and bring them before the bar of justice—barring failure. We eventually made our way back to our taxi. The stench was awful, but we still managed to gag a few times on the way home.

Sometimes those who served and protected choked on their own silly, cowed sayings.

I walked into the embassy travel office the next morning and strode directly and purposefully to the American supervisor's desk. Willis Jenkins had six weeks left on his sentence and he was most anxious to wrap things up and leave. I thrust my badge and credentials in his face and demanded to see the travel requests of all embassy staffers for the past six months. He impolitely told me to get lost. He said he was too busy and to come back later—like in six weeks.

I told him I was conducting an important investigation for the IG's office. I added that it would be tragic if he had to stay at post an extra few weeks to assist me. He

readily agreed to my request and was compliant to a fault. I now had his undivided attention, cooperation and undying gratitude. He probably hated my guts.

I explained that I merely wanted to spot check some names to see if things were in order. Like I had with everyone else, I assured him it was just a routine exercise. No one was in trouble, especially not him. We simply had to dot our "I's" and cross our "T's" and all that. As a longtime bureaucrat, he easily related to what I was telling him. He assured me that he strictly adhered to the letters of the regulations in his own job.

He set me up in a nearby cubicle and let me go through his files without asking questions or looking over my shoulder each time I went for his drawers. He badly wanted to go home on schedule or sooner, if he could finagle it. I intimated that if anything of value surfaced during my inquiries, he might have to accompany me to Washington before his tour expired. He was elated at the prospect of leaving lovely Kabul early. Willis was now my new, best friend.

It took me a couple of hours to wade through all the files. While there were a number of people assigned to the embassy, there were fewer who traveled more or less regularly. I could quickly dismiss the predictable R&Rs, home leave requests, emergency medical travel, and the like. That wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to know if there was any travel being conducted by officials to places that weren't connected with official duties, vacations or recalls to the department in Washington.

I also was interested in any personal travel booked through the travel office. That was pretty standard procedure since the travel office operates much like a travel agency back home. It made the air and hotel

reservations, scored discounts and perks and then delivered the completed package a few days later to the traveler with a nice ribbon attached. No one wanted to contend with the airlines or make their own arrangements. It was too much of a hassle, especially in a place like Kabul—the money conversion thing got complicated too.

I found several things of interest, but none necessarily damning in itself. I saw Tommy Thompson had traveled to Istanbul on several occasions on U.S. government orders. It was a bit unusual, but certainly not rare or illegal per se. Contractors occasionally traveled on behalf of Uncle Sam outside the scope of the contract. Doing a formal change order to a contract could take many weeks to complete. The contractors understood the situation and sometimes traveled under U.S. government orders to facilitate business and maintain a cordial relationship with the client.

Tommy could well be traveling to Istanbul on behalf of the embassy in support of the security contract. It was a big operation and lots of equipment and supplies originated in Europe because purchase costs from the States would be prohibitive and uncompetitive. I also noticed that Ambrose Pierce had traveled twice to Hong Kong in the past two months, once on business and the other on his own dime, for pleasure. Again, the trips weren't all that unusual—Hong Kong was a popular tourist spot for everyone.

The official travel could be explained as being business-related. It wasn't unusual for senior Foreign Service officers (with a lot of chutzpah and little concern for the department's budget) to travel to conferences or venues more conducive to vacation than business. Of

course, Uncle Sam picked up the tab. The scam went something like this: since the trip had to be justified to the officer's superior, the officer would do his or her homework and find a conference, seminar, or symposium in Hong Kong that had something to do with Afghanistan—at least tangentially. The officer then sent a lengthy cable with detailed justification to attend the Second Annual International Bluebottle Fly seminar at the Hong Kong Hilton.

As the officer's boss obviously knew, the bluebottle fly problem was a serious concern to Afghanistan and high on the upcoming U.S. agenda of things to worry about. I'd guess that six times out of ten the ploy worked. The officer cheerfully went off on vacation at taxpayer expense—it was only money after all.

I also saw a third name in the files that rang loud Notre Dame Cathedral-size bells. I had a hunch who might be watching Tommy's crooked back. It was all interesting, but not conclusive. I had suspicion, but no substance. I didn't even see the smoke from the gun barrel then.

I finished and instructed Willis to let me know if any of the people on my prepared list requested travel. I wanted to know immediately. I wrote my room and cell numbers on the back of my business card and handed it to him and he put it in his wallet for safekeeping. I had also included a number of throwaway names so he couldn't be sure whom I might be targeting. I didn't think he would blab since he desperately wanted to go home. He also enjoyed the drama and his new role as a junior G-man too much. I could see those things in his enthusiasm and questions. He wanted to be part and parcel of the case. I had just made another friend for America.

It wasn't more than two days before Willis phoned me.

He told me that Tommy Thompson was heading to Istanbul. I instructed Willis to book me on an earlier flight so I would be at the hotel before Tommy even landed. I was thoroughly familiar with Istanbul having seen *Topkapi* four times. Language wouldn't be a problem either since I had memorized all the key lines spoken between Maximillian Schell and Melina Mercouri. I could recite them flawlessly.

I dreamed I was Nero fiddling up a firestorm. I dreamed more of his naughty sister Drusilla. She was one special lady who I believed haunted each one of my past lives. I clearly remembered that I had known her several times, but I didn't have a clue as to how or where—I just couldn't put my finger on it. I continued to diddle while Rome burned. Just as she was feeding me grapes with her toes, I was startled by the banging of the huge cymbal hanging from the ceiling of the palace courtyard. I didn't comprehend the symbolism immediately, but the booming continued to reverberate in my head.

I suddenly awoke and couldn't breathe because the whole room, my CONEX, my hooch, was entirely engulfed in smoke and fire. The booming sound was the security guard banging on my door trying to rouse me from sleep. Thank goodness I was an alert, erect, and light sleeper. I slipped out of bed, crawled across the floor and reached the door. I had the presence of mind to wet a towel and place it at the bottom of the door. This would effectively prevent the intrusion of smoke. I belatedly realized that the smoke and fire were confined to my room. I quickly acknowledged my error; removed the towel and washed my face with it. I wanted to look

presentable for the ghoulish onlookers lurking outside.

I rolled out the door and onto the front step. I was badly shaken up and coughing. I pulled a cigarette out of the waistband of my underwear and found a charred passage from Gideon with which to light it. I knew the book would come in handy in life's tough times. I was a true believer in all things seen, experienced, and claimed on my expense report. Like me, the Lord worked in mysterious ways. I just prayed to God that it wasn't his opposite number yanking my mortal chain. I inhaled slowly to make the most of it. I had to calm down and focus on the situation. Obviously, someone had tried to kill me since there was nothing else to account for the mysterious fire. These guys played hardball, but so did Avery Dick when he was fired up.

It finally dawned on me—my feathered fire alarm hadn't gone off. I rushed around the corner of my CONEX and found Fred lying very still on the ground below his perch. The poor little guy looked like he was on his last wings. I pulled him to me and put my mouth over his beak and breathed the gift of life into his tiny lungs. I listened to his weak and sketchy heartbeat. I then flapped his wings to resuscitate him. Someone offered me a Slurpee straw and I immediately jammed it down his delicate throat. It was raspberry flavored, my favorite. Such small, thoughtful acts of kindness and civility were never forgotten in the Foreign Service since they were so damn rare. However, nothing seemed to revive him. Fred was still comatose and out cold too. The combination of conditions didn't get any worse for the soon to be dearly departed. Moreover, I dearly didn't like that part of his purported demise one iota, or bit for that matter. The thought of my noble falcon suffering an ignoble death

was almost too much to bear. But I needed to keep my emotions and wits in check to even have the slightest chance of saving his life.

I then did the unthinkable—I called a Code Blue on Fred. It was a last desperate act of a loving father for his dying son. I had to be very careful in doing this since I didn't want to confuse the emergency response procedures for national terrorism alerts, DEFCONS, air quality warnings, and Amber alerts with a Code Blue. I was partially color-blind, so I worried I might not get it right. However, I vowed to the powers above that my beloved child would not die in my arms. I would drop the feathered sucker like a dead weight long before that happened.

I shouted to one of the curious bystanders to bring me a coat hanger—stat. I quickly untwisted the hanger and removed the back plate of my watch. Fortunately, the hanger was a metal one and not plastic. Otherwise Fred would have been totally screwed. I took the straightened hanger and touched my watch's Duracell battery to one end and Fred's chest to the other. I figured that if it could energize bunnies, it would work for falcons too. Luckily, I guessed right. Fred gasped and coughed up several slimy fur balls. He flapped about and unsteadily got on his feet. He was alive, but it was no miracle, it was an Avery—I'd saved his life. The little son-of-a-bitch now owed me big-time.

I thought later that Fred's condition couldn't have been caused by smoke inhalation. There just wasn't that much smoke behind my room so I suspected fowl play most foul. It was likely someone had sneaked up on him while he was lightly dozing. He'd have one of his eyes open at all times because that was standard security practice for

falcons and private detectives. We all knew they never slept by keeping one eye open at all times. The attacker must have approached from his blind side and knocked him out cold.

I also toyed with the idea that someone had administered chloroform or Rohypnol to him, but I quickly dismissed those possibilities from my mind. Fred had already developed a high tolerance to both. He wouldn't readily succumb to those impotent potions. He was a sick, but very mellow little bird and a high-flyer even perched atop his clothesline.

Sometimes the vices and virtues of those who served and protected collided head-on.

CHAPTER 15

BULLISH BY THE BOSPORUS

Istanbul was a fantastic world city. It wasn't the capital of Turkey and therefore less burdened by the bureaucratic intrigues of Ankara. I understood the city's great historical significance as the east-west crossroads of crusaders and tradesmen alike. It was also the ancient home of the Eastern Orthodox Church—the shawarma wasn't bad either. I didn't even bother tailing Tommy from the airport since it wasn't necessary. I knew when he was arriving and where he was staying and for how long. I correctly gauged his arrival at the Hilton to within five minutes. He was carrying a small rolling suitcase and a soft shoulder bag. He also had an orange goodie bag, a diplomatic

pouch, tightly clutched in his right hand.

I strongly sensed that something was out-of-place. It was only then I realized Tommy's colorful, uncoordinated wardrobe was most definitely gauche. I hoped the receptionists wearing bright red fezzes wouldn't peg him as an American. That might set back diplomatic relations for years between our countries and we didn't need another enemy. We Americans do have a certain image to foster and preserve by our mannerisms and dress. It was Brits like Tommy who set the fashion world on its ear. *Someone needed to properly dress him down or up*, I mentally cringed.

I had registered as Sven Swensen, a regional sales rep for Ikea based in Rome. I thought Tommy might have the smarts to see if anyone he knew registered at the hotel. Sven Swensen was a solid, middle-class, *Scandahoovian* name. I decided on the spur of the moment to use it, despite the country's decidedly leftist, com-symp leanings. I still couldn't forgive the Soviets for letting the East Germans bring down the Berlin Wall signaling the end of the Cold War. We didn't win—they simply were worn down first and lost.

It was a wonderful era of predictable, gainful employment for the spooks working both sides of the fence or wall, in this instance. Those fences had made for good neighbors for decades. Why didn't we listen to the wisdom of our prophetic and poetic elders? I was working as a consultant at the time and consequently lost my contract since there was no enemy to fight anymore. Fortunately, we quickly found a new one and business had been brisk since.

We Americans had been thoroughly terrorized ever since. With all the hype and hoopla, terrorism had

become a significant growth industry. Our country's GNP had risen 1.7 percent since 9/11 as a result. I was now an energetic entrepreneur and staunch stakeholder in the world-wide enterprise.

I had arranged with Tom Collins, the consulate general's RSO, to borrow his senior local. Tom was a tall drink of water from Sarsparilla, Texas. He constantly chewed tobacco and perfected the art of long-distance spit shooting. He was one tough, savvy agent. No one ever stood in Tom's way.

The consulate general in Istanbul was larger than many embassies. By the way, you could only have one embassy in a country at any given time, so said Geneva's Convention. You had to call your field offices something else in consolation—consulate general, consulate, or consular agency. In cases like Cuba and Taiwan, it got more confusing. They were respectfully and respectively referred to as the Interests Section of the Swiss embassy and the American Enterprise Institute. Please don't call them embassies because that would be a terrible diplomatic gaffe and truth.

Kamal Attaturk was Tom's senior Foreign Service National investigator. There were two assigned to the congen Istanbul RSO shop and I had four on staff when I worked in Bangkok. Kamal was a retired senior officer with the Turkish National Security Service. His organization was the FBI, Diplomatic Security Service, Secret Service, and Marshal's Service rolled into one. These were powerful dudes and Kamal knew everything and everyone that needed to be known in the city's underbelly.

FSN investigators were worth their weight in gold. They routinely conducted the pre-employment

background checks of local staff, did their five-year updates, and handled customary liaison duties with the police, the TNSS, and other government authorities. However, their real value laid in their ability to get other, more important things done for Uncle Sam. By their knowledge, experience, skill, guile, connections, and petty bribes, information and things magically become available. People were found, passport and visa fraud investigations solved, U.S. presidents and vice presidents accommodated on state visits, and many American diplomats and tourists bailed out of jams.

For the paranoia-prone, yes, they were likely reporting to their former bosses at some frequency about embassy personalities and activities. It cut both ways though since they were occasionally tasked to serve as back channels to host government officials on sensitive matters that shouldn't see the light of day. In any case, it made absolutely no difference in terms of their utility. We were getting far more out of the relationship than we were giving. It was not even a close *quid pro quo*.

Tommy left the hotel early that evening holding onto the pouch for dear life. He walked instead of taking a taxi and we discreetly followed. We tailed him to the largest and most popular open air restaurant in Istanbul. It was located close to the waterfront in a busy section of the old city. With Kamal's *petit* bribe to the *maitre d'*, we didn't have a problem getting a table where we could discreetly observe Tommy. After a few minutes, he was joined at the table by two young Turks who warmly greeted him like an old friend. They ordered drinks and meals and we did the same.

The entertainment was typical Turkish fare, a belly dancer backed by three reed musicians and a bass

drummer. She writhed and wriggled to the incomprehensible beat of the cacophonous instruments. To be polite, I walked up to her several times during the performance and stuffed Turkish scoots in her waistband. I also pinched her generous butt for good measure. She always gave me an enigmatic smile and the middle finger. She couldn't fool me though since her interest in me was much too obvious from her demeanor. I knew what she was after. It was that little something I kept tucked away in my pants for such situations—the *INS Form #I-95* non-immigrant visa referral document I had secreted in my jockey shorts. It never failed to deliver the goods. It was the ultimate seducer of foreign women.

Sometimes those who protected and served must paper over their many indiscretions and aberrant appetites.

Street vendors freely intermingled with the guests. They would offer up cheap trinkets to the tourists, but they were generally booted or shooed away by the annoyed patrons. However, there was an adorable flower girl of about nine or ten selling single roses wrapped in aluminum foil. She was obviously Romany, or gypsy, from her dress and features. We had to be damned careful with our belongings around her. They were the world's best scam artists, pick pockets and grab and runners, bar none on the planet. Tommy and his friends finally left the restaurant, but without his orange bag. However, one of the young Turks did. We didn't follow them, but instead finished our Turkish, Greek, or Cypriot coffee. Regardless, it all tasted the same, like crap. It was time to change nationalities and ask for the check.

Kamal and I walked about three blocks and sat down

on a bench next to the flower girl. She produced a small package from inside of her flowing blouse. As instructed, she had grabbed it out of the open orange bag sitting next to Tommy's feet. It didn't take long to figure out that it was semi-refined heroin. I used my field test kit and the powder turned bright blue, a positive hit. Kamal simply tasted a bit and concluded the same thing.

Sometimes those who served and protected employed different forensic techniques to arrive at the same obvious conclusion.

The heroin was high quality, potent stuff that would be further refined and cut in Turkey before its journey to Western Europe. Turkey was the processing and distribution center for Afghan heroin and tons of it flowed across the Bosphorus into the toes, noses, arms, legs, hands, and buttocks of the world's addicts. Tommy was one very serious drug dealer who was moving large quantities of high quality heroin out of Afghanistan and selling it to the major refiners and smugglers in Turkey. I estimated that one goodie bag could hold fifteen kilos or more of product. He would need a real (or a real good fake) U.S. diplomatic passport to work the transport angle of the operation.

The diplomatic orange bags were easy to come by since they weren't controlled items. They were simply canvass bags of little import other than to transport highly classified materials and highly illicit quantities of heroin around the globe. The lead seals securing them could be easily fashioned so no one would be the wiser. The whole process would be a cinch for an insider with minimal skills and imagination. The list of embassy suspects would be very long indeed.

We decided to let Tommy return to Kabul. We had him cold, but we still needed to identify his cohorts in crime. The two young Turks were tailed by a couple of gypsy kids hired by Kamal and their identities would soon be known to the TNSS. They would be put under 24/7 surveillance by the Turkish authorities. They weren't going anywhere fast, but down.

I had another day to kill before my return flight to Kabul. I had to remember to send an attaboy letter to Attaturk. The following morning, he invited me to tour the Topkapi Palace Museum and I willingly accepted his gracious invitation. As we walked, he pointed out many magnificent mosques and cathedrals, ornate and exquisite examples of Christian, Byzantine, and Ottoman architecture.

Not to be outdone, I put my hands together and placed my index fingers upward in a pointed V shape and recited aloud and demonstrated the only Catholic hymn I could sing along to.

"Here's the church. Here's its steeple," I gleefully sang. I opened my thumb doors for him to see all the people. I even vigorously wiggled my fingers in his face for greater dramatic effect.

He was speechless at this bit of awesome Yankee ingenuity. I knew he was thoroughly impressed with my performance because he was momentarily silent. I had to admit, my exhibition of open-palmistry and prestidigitation was impeccable. We Americans were good at giving thoughtful, slight-of-hand jobs to others of this world. I was one proud citizen soldier.

Later we visited the world famous Istanbul souk and I bought a couple of small gifts for my sons. I capped off the day back at the hotel by getting a shiatsu massage,

followed by a Swedish sauna and being hand-dried with a large Egyptian cotton towel. I was multilaterally relaxed and peaceful for a change and I couldn't wait for the next chance to skirmish with my foes. I checked out of the hotel early the next morning with all the Turkish towels from my room. *When in Rome, do as the Romans did*, I chuckled to myself.

Sometimes those who served and protected enjoyed gypping other people while being rubbed the wrong way.

CHAPTER 16

FULL COURT PRESAGE

We had Tommy Thompson dead to rights. I also strongly suspected complicity by other embassy officials as well. There were also smaller fish to fry, but I wasn't angling for them right now. However, the Marine security guards were now off the hook. Innuendo and speculation were often considered hard evidence to secure an arrest warrant in the States, but this was Afghanistan. I needed to prove my suspicions beyond a reasonable doubt, and that wouldn't be easy.

I had to be very careful or things could blow up in our faces. In DS, that's considered an unacceptable loss of face. The situation called for all of my experience, tradecraft skills and dumb luck to be rolled into one frigging, perfect storm. I had to be bewitched, bothered and bewildered at the same time to succeed

successfully. I had to pull things off without a serious hitch, glitch, or hiccup. In other words, I couldn't screw up or I'd be toast.

I had toast with raspberry jam for breakfast the next morning in the embassy cafeteria. It was just like mom used to fix me when I was a kid growing up with big dreams and hopes for a normal life. However, I had swallowed my toast, along with my childish aspirations, long ago. Now I only faced the jams, but I licked them most of the time.

Rex and I would have to put our heads together for a heart-to-heart talk. That was how we brainstormed in DS and there was no shortage of heart there. We needed to develop an investigative strategy. DS's investigative skills were second to none; a close third maybe, but never second-rate. However, the powerful and mysterious investigative techniques and methodologies we employed were closely guarded secrets. They should have been as they represented the latest in cutting-edge forensics the world scientific community had to offer. I could be stripped of my epaulets and gold shield *boutonniere* if I whispered a single word about them. As a result, I could be drummed out of the Service for willfully disclosing them to unauthorized, gullible persons. No worry, I didn't plan to be snared.

I borrowed the Marine House Ouija board since it was a powerful, professional tool in the right, trained hands. I took it to my room where I could be alone because I needed to fully concentrate on my task and come up with a game plan soonest. By the way, Ouija spirits were nothing to fool around with. You had to have courage and confidence so you wouldn't end up looking like an asshole in front of your closest buddies. Moreover, one

could easily be sucked into the fourth dimensional vortex of the nonliving dead if you weren't damned careful. I should know since my DS career spanned twenty-three years of living hell on earth.

In my own inimitable style, I went straight to the chase. I asked the board if I would be pretty day-after-day? Would I solve the case and be a real American hero for a change? The board was silent at first. *Que sera, sera*, I thought. It finally responded by saying I had to use the planchette still sitting in the box since that was the point of the game. I placed it in the middle of the board and let it do its own thing and the damn thing was frisky!

While warming up, I asked the spirits if Irena had any STDs of consequence and clapped when I saw the answer. The next person on my short list of interrogatories was a certain embassy official. That was someone whose initials began and ended with the letters AP. As a hint, he was someone who was a dangerous Gray Dragon and someone who had dissed me in his office weeks earlier. You've got three guesses, so you'd better choose wisely because the clock's ticking.

Okay, lucky guess; he was none other than Ambrose M. Pierce, Deputy Chief of Mission, United States Embassy, Afghanistan. I looked forward to asking the all-knowing spirits if he was involved in Tommy's many capers. However, I was so nervous that my hand shook like I was palsied on St. Vitas Day.

I let the planchette move of its own preordained accord. To do otherwise would be a violation of the game's volition. It slowly moved back and forth over the board. It paused at Boardwalk, but quickly sidestepped Jail. I thought the evasive actions might hold significance. It continued vacillating between Maybe and Yes. It then

slyly reversed itself, vacillating between “Yes” and “Perhaps.” It was certainly wise and crafty. The results weren’t conclusive, but close enough for government work and Mr. Ambrose M. Pierce III was now in my sights. I would whack the mole as it popped its ugly head from its bolt hole. I would knock his vermin block off and laugh at my handiwork. That meant I’d try to get on his appointment calendar, if he weren’t too busy.

You’d better mind your ‘Ps’ and ‘Qs’, Mister Smarty Pants, I quietly and bravely said to myself. The language didn’t get any more discourteous than that bit of department vehemence. I must apologize for my coarseness, but sometimes you had got to blow off steam or it could inwardly eat up your innards.

I would stake out Ambrose’s residence and watch his every slither. He’d eventually make a misstep and I’d be there to gloat at his fall since he lived in the penthouse atop one of the apartment buildings on the chancery compound. I would erect a pup tent and camp on the grounds below. No one would pay any attention because housing here was always tight here.

However, housing overseas was one BFD in the Foreign Service. It literally could make or break a marriage and/or an assignment. One always wanted to get as much space and amenities as you could squeeze out of the system without acting or looking like a complete asshole in front of your colleagues. Well, that wasn’t really true since everyone else was shamelessly doing the same thing by playing musical residences. You only wanted the tune stopped when you had locked into something that was acceptable to the missus. The rule of thumb: the worse the shithole, the better the housing. There had to be some payback for selflessly serving

one's country overseas.

The ritual was guided by the department's Overseas Buildings Office in Washington. Through an arcane formula known only to the feeble-minded, it assigned housing based on a combination of factors. Personal grade or rank was one. The position you occupied at post was another. Family composition and size was another. Special needs and circumstances were yet others.

If your wife's period and those of your daughters coincided, it could mean the place was too small and you'd be in for a few days of living hell. If your parakeet and cat didn't get along, you needed a bigger place with better karma. If your mother-in-law accompanied you to post, forget it, everything would be too small. The rules were complicated, vague and open to wide interpretation.

Each embassy had a housing committee composed of peers to hear appeals of its decisions. The appeals ran the gamut from A to Z—absurd to zany. A favorite argument related to family size. That was where the officer patiently explained to the committee that he and his wife planned to have their first child in a couple years and must decorate the nursery soonest. He would go into great detail about *feng shui*, good auras, and evil vibes. He cited advice, from his wife's sister's obstetrician, to create safe space early to avoid terrible psychic traumas to the child later on. He went on and on about good parenting and that drivel somehow translated into a requirement for greater square footage. His wife quietly sat with her hands folded over the stomach she was vigorously pushing out in front of her. She sometimes left the room with her hands held firmly over her mouth. I suspected that you had already broken the code, but the scamming didn't stop there.

Special needs were other good examples how the State Department housing program did, or didn't, work overseas. You must first start from the premise that everyone was special in the Foreign Service. However, some people were more special than others. It was neither an egalitarian nor rational system. A special need was something very special a needy person thought up designed to especially fool the housing committee.

For example, the officer's son, Johnny, suffered from chronic IBS, or incontinent bowel syndrome. The kid couldn't keep his shit together and he was running back and forth all night to the apartment's only bathroom. The rest of the family now experienced chronic SBS or swollen bladder syndrome as a result of Johnny's condition. Couldn't they get a bigger place with an extra bathroom given the family's tract record? That tactic rarely worked since most committee members damn well knew that *incontinent* referred to a Peace Corps volunteer working in central Africa.

The assignment of residences to most senior embassy officials was often fixed beforehand. They were handed down to their replacements with a kind reminder to regularly water the Fichus. You could readily envision that these weren't humble abodes—they couldn't be since the officers must hold representational functions at their homes. These were done to covertly gather hard, strategic intelligence and to soften-up the opposition. The large, well-appointed residences suggested to foreign guests, usually middling to senior ranking bureaucrats like their hosts, that everyone lived well in the States. Affluence equated to democracy. Democracy equated to money and the Almighty Buck spoke volumes.

The residences and trappings overtly conveyed to the

less fortunate of the world that they too could live the life of comfort and success. If they're really good, they might even aspire to the coveted green card status. It only required staying strongly wedded to U.S. foreign policy goals, buying overpriced U.S. weapons systems, and casting decisive votes in the United Nations General Assembly. Of course, it was all very subtle and cordial. I won't describe the typical ambassador's residence. I didn't particularly like Versailles—too French for my taste.

Sometimes we Americans sent our country's welcoming messages to others with open arms, clenched fists, or greased palms.

I staked out Ambrose's Pierce's place and my tent the next morning. I had bought personal hygiene items, camouflage underwear and other supplies at the PX at one of the U.S. military bases in Kabul, but I refused to buy U.S. Army desert boots. I had few personal belongings after the fire so storage space wasn't a problem with my pup. I had a sleeping bag, a fresh carton of cigarettes and a box of Zinfandel so I was all set.

Ambrose's routine the next few days turned out to be just that: routine, predictable, and boring. He'd walk the fifty yards from his apartment building to the chancery. That was always done at the ungodly, anal retentive hour of eight AM sharp. Precisely at noon, he would leave the chancery carrying a small, nondescript brown bag. He would sit at the same picnic table next to the swimming pool and typically lunch with some of his direct reports. I noticed the public affairs officer, the economic counselor, the regional security officer, and the chief of station sitting with him at one time or another. There was nothing suspicious in the activity. It was expected, customary

male-bonding in the Foreign Service.

Of course, it was also approaching performance appraisal time, so I couldn't fully discern the motive for these highly sedentary meetings. Ambrose only would lunch on nice days—that meant everyday at the same place and time. That was because the ambassador decreed that every day in Afghanistan would be a nice day to be savored and enjoyed to the fullest.

Camping out in the front yard of the chancery wasn't getting me any further ahead in my investigation. I was wasting time and I didn't have much of that left before the IG's office would tell me to wrap things up and order me home. I didn't want that to happen just yet as there was still one hellish plot to unravel here. I knew it was woven from unwholesome yarn, yet I couldn't fully discern its warp or woof.

Sometimes those who served and protected tended to overly embroider the importance of their detecting and crocheting skills.

CHAPTER 17

KING KONG COMETH

Willis Jenkins informed me that Ambrose Pierce was making another trip to Hong Kong and this time it was personal. I hadn't visited the city-state in years and I loved to eat a little Chinese now and again. I loved to gobble up frequent flyer miles even more since it was all part of the job. God bless America! I booked a flight and arrived a full day ahead of Ambrose given the time difference.

Like at Istanbul, I arranged for the ConGen's RSO, Francis Tully, to lend me one of his investigators. Francis frankly went by Frank because he couldn't stand *Francis*, even though his name came with postal privileges stamped all over it. Given his given name, I was surprised that Frank wasn't. He was a secretive, quiet, and withdrawn person. I was highly attuned to people's

names and their associated personalities, given my surname and its manly connotation. I decided to dick-around awhile before checking into the Hilton Kowloon; the same hotel Ambrose had booked. I had a room on the second floor with a fantastic view of the harbor. I was greatly relieved to have chosen the chain since I was deathly afraid of Hyatt's.

The investigator's name was Harry Wong who had left the Royal Constabulary of Hong Kong after the Brits graciously donated the colony to the People's Republic of China. He quickly jumped at the chance to join the consulate general's staff. Hong Kong was now called a special administrative region or SAR by the sorry bureaucrats in Beijing.

The unrelenting commie bastards never left a stone unturned in their quest for world domination. Thank God for the 1,504 brave souls in Taiwan holding out against the onslaught of this aggressor's naked power grab. One billion reds and pinkos can't be right—the numbers are so humongous that they just don't add up. Besides, Uncle Sam's nuclear-tipped missiles were big equalizers of might and right.

I briefed Harry on the investigation and told him what I expected of him and Ambrose. He said he would arrange for surveillance from the time Ambrose landed at Chek Lap Kok Airport until his wheels-up departure.

I asked Harry how the surveillance team would recognize Ambrose since we white, middle-aged westerners all looked the same. He said the team employed the arts of an ancient Chinese puzzle trick. Only the initiated could decipher its wisdom. He then whispered that the gate attendant would have the First Class steward say in a loud, but face-saving voice,

“Thanks for flying Cathay Pacific, Mr. Pierce.”

If that didn't work, the immigration officers were tipped to look for a Mr. Ambrose B. Pierce III traveling on a U.S. diplomatic passport and arriving on CP flight 556 at 0920 hours, at gate 15, on such and such date. He was likely to be wearing a blue blazer, gray slacks and carrying a small diplomatic pouch. I really admired Harry's subtle Chinese humor and detective skills.

Harry looked me up and down and I'm sure my crimson leisure suit and highly polished black wingtips impressed him. He said that all Americans didn't look the same because human recognition was all in the eyes. He mentioned that when it came to physiognomy, the eyes had it hands-down over other body parts every time. Harry really did have a fine sense of humor for a foreigner. I appreciated his slant on things and I told him so, but I didn't mention my perspective on Chinese women though.

I had spent time in Beijing as well, but there's no comparison between the two cities. On my visit there, I found that the Forbidden City wasn't, the Great Wall was only so-so, and the lamas and llamas were a confusing mix of priests and beasts. The priests spit for good luck; it was the only way I could tell the difference between the two creatures. However, in fairness, Tiananmen Square might have been square. Of course, all of this communist mumbo-jumbo was more of the same disingenuous disinformation intended for American consumption. However, we didn't swallow outrageous propaganda. We'd only shoved it down more gullible throats.

Ambrose's Cathay Pacific flight arrived on time. Like Tommy, he entered the hotel with bags of white gold stuffed into an orange colored sack. There was no

mystery what he was up to and even Bugs Bunny already had his answer. I was more interested in identifying whom he met in Hong Kong than why he was here. The *here* part was all too obvious; the *who* part remained to be seen. Regardless, *who* was still on third base trying to steal home.

It didn't take long for *whom* to be revealed. We followed Ambrose to the Star Ferry to Hong Kong, along with a hundred or so other passengers. We took up concealed positions where we could keep an eye on him. I didn't take long for him to hook up with another gringo standing by the rail. The *who or whom* was none other than my old pal Larry Bumpkiss!

He was carrying an orange goodie bag identical to the one held by Ambrose. I was shocked, but not particularly surprised. I was fairly certain that Larry was involved in the Ajax's ghost employee scam. His involvement in the drug caper was just icing on the corrupt cupcake, but he had fooled me on one thing though. I had known he was leaving post for a scheduled R&R visit to Dubai and I hadn't thought it was unusual in any respect because Foreign Service officers received three short R&Rs out of Afghanistan during their tour. Dubai was fairly close and a popular spot for westerners in that part of the world. I missed the fact that he simply transited Dubai and flown directly to Hong Kong and no one at post would be the wiser about this detour.

We tailed both of them to a large park in central Hong Kong. They waited on a bench for about twenty minutes until three Chinese men arrived and stood in front of them. They were recognizable members of the Chinese criminal societies called the triads. And they could be easily recognized due to their black suits and dark blue

fluorescent tats of a triad spear inked on their foreheads. It was a heads-up solid clue as we said in DS.

At the top echelon of the triads were the snakeheads. These were men of great position, influence, and power in the criminal societies. They ran all of the major gambling and loan sharking rackets in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Macau. The white slave trade was especially lucrative as Chinese and other Asian women were smuggled to the U.S. for purposes of prostitution. The Mann Act didn't apply since all persons were female. Apparently, the act wasn't gender neutral or spelled properly. Moreover, the criminal enterprise was also misidentified as being white—more Communist propaganda, I suspected. But a Triad's biggest, illicit interest was drugs in any quantity, quality, shape, or form. There was always a ready market and all of it sold for a tidy profit. The snakeheads coils embraced much of the known world. Every Chinese laundry worker, operator, and owner on the planet feared them more than the avaricious, expansionist Koreans and Indians.

Harry took some close-up photos of the men and their activities. The cordial exchange of gifts was recorded for posterity and prosecution. I later asked if he could get one of me standing in front of the Star Ferry. He reluctantly agreed. I would put it in the Avery Dick scrapbook of memorable memorabilia. I then asked if he knew of a good Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood. He winced at my question and my stomach growled back. We settled on one that just happened to be close by.

I ordered Peking duck as that was a proper American dish since it predated Beijing and the godless communist hordes. Harry had something indescribable and

unpronounceable. We didn't get fortune cookies at the end of the meal and I pondered the karmic symbolism of this most manner-less act. I don't need to tell you that I was hungry an hour later and ordered a double cheeseburger from the hotel's room service. The local food here was truly second-rate compared to the States. However, I didn't mean to bust Chinese culinary chops. The laundry service was okay though. Thankfully, the hotel didn't hold a fire drill.

It was time for me to fold my four hundred dollar a night tent in the Hilton. I had a few regrets since I really enjoyed the bright lights of the city. Harry presented me with a parting gift, a customary, thoughtful gesture and I recognized it immediately. It was one of those woven finger toys you played with as a kid. He put a finger in one end of it and asked me to do the same with the other end. He kept telling me to pull his finger as he laughingly farted-up a storm. He kept it up for a full two minutes. I couldn't remove my finger and he couldn't stop laughing. I couldn't wait for the air to clear between us.

I obviously didn't understand Chinese proverbs or bodily function humor.

In return, I gave Harry a Mr. Potato Head with a spray-painted yellow face affixed with beady, inscrutable eyes. He was taken aback by the gesture as expected. Obviously, he really appreciated American highbrow, cerebral humor. I had finally found the chink in his armor and it turned out to be only skin deep. I then gave Harry a firm handshake and hugged his small, China doll head. As a rule, Asians just didn't measure up to Americans by any yardstick, metric or otherwise. Regardless, I had made another comrade for my rich uncle.

Sometimes those who served and protected marched

onward like clueless Christian soldiers.

CHAPTER 18

INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE SWINE

My three little pigs—Messrs. Tommy Thompson, Larry Bumpkiss, and Ambrose Pierce—were smoked meat. I would hang them out to dry on tenterhooks in the woodshed behind the woodpile in the woody woods. They'd suckled Uncle Sam's munificent, but gender confused, teats too long and now it was time to harshly wean them from their last supper. Payback wouldn't be quid pro quo; it would be tit for tat, and then some. I was a mercenary, a soldier of fortune—my good fortune, of course. I could be one ferocious *Schweinhundt* when I needed to be.

I would huff and puff and blow their house down with

every ounce of strength I could muster, despite my smoking. I wasn't anyone to truffle with when my back was up. I'd ignore their insincere sniffles, snuffles, and snorts for mercy. I'd have their baby back ribs with barbeque sauce for lunch.

Okay, so much for the verbal posturing and false bravado. In actuality, I would politely advise them of their constitutional rights against self-incrimination before I gracefully placed them into custody. That's how things were done in the Diplomatic Security Service.

It was all done with innocent smiles and flurries of custom-fitted coattails. It was all designed as a delicate, highly-choreographed Kabuki dance. I technically couldn't arrest them, but I sure could keep them under wraps until they were returned to the States to stand humiliating trials and tribulations. I wrote a lengthy email message to Dan Sykes and briefed Rex Gallant on my trip. I kept everyone but Jersey in the loop.

I had tasked Ali Akbar with locating the gang's hideout. I didn't think it would take him and his brethren long to get a fix on the drug depot. I had them down and dirty, but I wanted more. I wanted the whole *enchilada* or lamb kebab, as the case may be. I'd dismantle their filthy sty straw-by-straw. I'd leave no mud brick unturned or any needle in a haystack. I'd grab any and all monies or drugs lying around for the grabbing. I wanted these bastards more than life itself, or even Jenna, at the moment. Well maybe on second thought.

Maybe I would sort out my skewed desires later with a cooler head. In any event, we were getting very close to wrapping up the investigation and it was time to take the bad guys down. I had heard from Hong Kong and

Istanbul that the major players there had been identified and placed under close surveillance. The authorities awaited our signal to pounce. It would be a short waiting game if I had my way.

We continued to exercise Fred in our spare time. I had joined Ahmed and Rashid on one of Fred's evening runs. Fred and I were in the back seat with the windows rolled down to let in the cool Sciroccos blowing through the long-abandoned Volkswagen assembly plant at the edge of the city. The bugs weren't so bad this time of the year so we were fairly comfortable watching and waiting. We drove Fred around for awhile to reinforce his sense of direction. There were few street signs so Fred couldn't cheat and I kept all of the city maps away from him too, just in case.

Just when you think things were going well, they quickly turned to donkey dung. It was God's little sense of humor for his underlings. As we rounded a corner, we were immediately entrapped in a classic terrorist ambush. Two donkey carts blocked our advance and another blocked us from behind. I felt like an ass for not anticipating something like this happening. Chiggers, it was the mighty assassins. Four of them jumped off the carts and surrounded our car. As they did so, they removed AK-47s from beneath their generous robes. We couldn't budge and I didn't dare pull my Smith as we were heavily outgunned, not to mention out-manuevered and outraged. However, they were still no match for us intellectually.

I quickly placed a prepared message in Fred's neck pouch and released him to the night before they could stop me or him. The pictorial message would inform Rex

of our dire circumstances. One was a cartoon figure with its head up its ass which meant I was in serious trouble and he should come running. Another showed two figures in bed and that meant Rex should never come a-knocking when my CONEX was a-rocking. I rocked occasionally when I was off-duty, even in Afghanistan. Regardless, I hoped to God I had chosen the right one! The Chiggers had shot at Fred, but missed him by a country kilometer. They did wound one of their own though. Dick Cheney would have been proud of their marksmanship.

One Chigger drove and two others got in the back seat with me. It was the old Arab squeeze play at play. They stunk to high heaven of eau de camel's breath so I wouldn't be able to identify them. With our hands bound and eyes blindfolded, they drove us around and about for about thirty minutes or so to confuse us as to our whereabouts. They didn't want us to retrace our route in the unlikely event that we escaped their clutches. Jesus, did the Chiggers think we were disoriented birdbrains?

They hadn't bothered to disguise their faces and that wasn't a good sign on the face of it. I'd informed them it was impossible to recognize them in any case. They all looked the same to me: filthy, swarthy Arabs. However, that argument wouldn't wash this time and I had to face the facts. It was naptime for Avery, no kidding.

What they didn't know was that I always kept my pockets full of Meow Mix for situations like this. I covertly dropped the morsels from the car window as we rode around the city so Fred and Rex would have an easy job locating us. Fred, not Rex, much preferred Meow Mix to crummy bread crumbs. I thought he was much too fickle and finicky for the Foreign Service. Fred, I meant.

We finally stopped and were marched into what I imagined was a sizeable small room. We were rudely and ungraciously seated. I simply couldn't abide such treatment.

"May I be formally announced and introduced to everyone present?" I smartly asked the room. "Please, it's standard protocol under the circumstances." They brusquely put me in my place by slapping me across the face with the butt of an AK-47. It wasn't called an assault rifle for nothing.

I next felt the first drop of water landing on my head. There were slow but steady drops following that one. I knew immediately that it was the old water torture trick. Eventually, the constant drippings would drive me half out of my mind. I would eventually spill my guts from every orifice for their sick amusement and education. That was a scary thought as I had only half a mind most of the time anyway so I guess I didn't have anything to lose.

We had all been well-versed and rehearsed by DS in this torturous technique and I'd play along to get along. When the pain became too intense to endure, I would provide a watered-down version of the information the bad guys so desperately sought. I'd simply handoff the important stuff to one of my multiples for safekeeping. It was a wholly effective countermeasure in a situation requiring multiplicity, guile, and mental illness to get by.

I learned much later that I was merely unlucky enough to be sitting below a leaky water pipe. However, the bothersome fact made no difference to a prideful, trained and vain government professional. Besides, the story would still be truthfully and modestly referred to as "Avery's little water torture incident in Kabul." Yes, it

certainly sounded boastful, but we couldn't spell or pronounce *self-aggrandizement* in DS, so it was okay.

We had been rolled-up and we realized we were in deep, donkey do-do. I knew better than most that the U.S. government wouldn't bail us out. It refused to negotiate with, or pay ransom to, kidnapers and other bad guys. Moreover, it wouldn't assist or facilitate the efforts of others who did so. Those things only encouraged more acts of terrorism. Of course, that left the victim's families, business partners, and kidnap/ransom insurers to pick up the tab on their own—the average taxpayer in Kokomo, Indiana, could sleep safely tonight.

I didn't have K/R coverage, but I hoped my condo association's umbrella policy didn't leak because it was a rainy day. I also wondered what I was worth as a human being and an American patriot. I guessed that I'd get some small change back from my dollar this time from Ronnie Mc D. Less than two cents was still money in my ledger. OK, big deal Mc Dude, I preferred Wendy's bun meat any day.

Within the first minute or so, I was personally addressed by a man talking through an old fashioned megaphone or a large dunce cap. It also might have been a female smoker with a tracheotomy. In any case, the methodology effectively disguised the person's voice. I didn't have a clue to the speaker's identity. He, I'll say *he*, broke the ice by asking how much I knew about the scams.

“Do you realize how much trouble you've caused us with your little investigative charades Mr. Dick?”

I decided to keep to the DS script designed for agents being detained or kidnapped overseas without a chance

in hell of being rescued.

“My name’s Avery Dick, U.S. Foreign Service, FP-1 officer. The number of cereals I consume each day is none of your damn business because that’s just too personal for my moral fiber.” That brought another gentle prod of the AK-47 to my groin.

“You’d better be serious, deadly serious, dick-head,” the megaphone spoke.

“Fuck off!” I bravely and foolishly shouted back. That careless remark resulted in a whack to my forehead from Mr. A. Kalashnikov. Fortunately, I had at least identified one of the bad guys—several times over.

I was out-cold for awhile and when I came to I was groggy and in serious pain from head to groin. I decided to come-clean with them by announcing that I was working under deep cover for the CIA.

When you tell someone you work for the State Department, especially the one in Washington, they’d snicker and say “Sure.” No matter how strenuously I insisted it was true, they never believed me so, for awhile, I would say I worked for the CIA’s Clandestine Services. They’d still snicker and say “Sure.” I couldn’t win, so I finally told everyone I worked for the U.S. Census Bureau. That only required me to be on the job once every ten years to count noses. They’d snicker and ask how they could sign on.

I wasn’t worried about impersonating a federal employee. I had been doing that with impunity in the State Department for years. The statute of limitations had expired long ago on my crime of long-suffering misrepresentation.

I told megaphone man that I’d been assigned by the AGENCY to look into the drug trade in Afghanistan. I

spoke the word AGENCY in big, bold capital letters to impress on him that there was only one.

I winked every time I mentioned AGENCY so that if he were slow-witted, he'd still get the message loud and clear through the wide end of his megaphone. He couldn't see the reassuring gesture with my blindfold, but I thought he might intuit it.

"I'm an officer in the CIA's Covert Operations Directorate—its clandestine service," I patiently explained.

"My CIA colleagues are doing the same assessment elsewhere in the world. In this instance, the AGENCY wants to determine how the drug dealing in Afghanistan is being done at the operational level."

"It understands the big picture stuff. It wants to know the identities of the mid-level players and their bosses. It wants to understand the operation's processing and distribution channels and networks; the identities of the people bribed and which senior government officials are covering for them."

I went on to say that the AGENCY wanted to know every major player in the "Who's Who" pantheon of the drug trade in the country. It clearly was a highly lucrative, significant, and complex business enterprise that needed to be dissected and closely studied. *Lessons learned* needed to be discerned and applied. I think I had him on my hook and I was ever so slowly reeling him into my net. I had to be careful not to tug too hard on the rod since there was no catch and release angle in this business.

"In sum, the CIA wants a big cut of the action. It intends to partner with the big boys who make the big bucks. Its budget has been pared back over the years by

the liberals on the Hill. It badly needs a substantial infusion of cash to carry out operations against the communists, insurgents, freedom fighters, lefties, extremists, centrists, patriots and terrorists of the world. That means anything and anyone who opposes the Bush regime's aims for world domination through peaceful conflict. It needs mega-amounts of monies to do that. The profits from illicit drugs are critical to the AGENCY's very survival." I waited a minute for the information to sink in.

"In return, the AGENCY is willing to provide the technical expertise and training to take these enterprises to new levels of profitability. It will employ its vast technical resources, such as communications interceptions and spy satellites, to check on the status of opium crops in the country. It will leak the locations of competitors' fields to the authorities and insist that the crops be eradicated.

"It will provide the latest, most covert listening gizmos to the drug and warlords of Afghanistan to bug the homes, cars, offices, confessional booths, bars and massage parlors of senior government officials. No stone will be left unturned in the AGENCY's fight for a piece of the action and that fact should be taken as gospel, my new friends.

"It will employ the two best intelligence sources and methods at its command—the powers of prayer and wishful thinking. It won't compromise its own vision and strategic plan for a world free of tyranny and disagreeable leftist human beings." I rested my case for a moment while I and the judge took a breather.

I continued pressing home my argument. I pointed out that the AGENCY already possessed a huge reservoir of

numbered accounts in offshore banks to launder the proceeds of the illicit drug sales. These could be set up and manipulated without qualm or question.

“The AGENCY was also prepared to send any recalcitrant competitors or nosy government officials to its secret prisons if they can’t be bribed or blackmailed.” I mentioned it was the latest intelligence rendition of “out of sight, out of mind,” I assured them.

I mentioned that the AGENCY subscribed to one guiding principle in running an effective, global business operation: money talked, bullshit walked. It had a vision, a pragmatic business sense, a master plan, and the iron will that lesser organizations could only envy from afar.

“Could I have a cigarette?” I asked the room.

“Sure,” the megaphone answered. “You’ll have an opportunity for a quick smoke later in front of the wall outside. I’ll even light it for you since your hands will be tied behind your back. Those are my last words. What are yours Mr. Dick? Do you want to speak now or forever hold your peace? ”

I appreciated his trite expression about coming clean because it fit so well with my predicament. But to add insult to my likely injury, he pointed out that smoking was the second leading cause of death, just behind lead poisoning, for obnoxious special agents of the Diplomatic Security Service. Jeez, I just had been unmasked while still blindfolded. This guy was good and I was impressed with his interrogation skills and professional courtesy.

I guessed my little CIA bedtime story wasn’t particularly amusing or convincing. I liked it though because it was wholly plausible, except for the “wishful thinking and prayer” part. If you were wondering, this wasn’t Peoria, not even close. My options had just run

out of options. I had run out of time and I couldn't run anymore. I now worried about saving my body and its mortal soul.

Sometimes those who served and protected tried to cling to the slightest bit of misguided hope.

Truthfully, I was scared shitless so I got down on my knees and begged for my life. I couldn't clasp my hands together in front of me since they were now tied behind my back. I guessed I could reverse pray though. Praying in a backhanded manner shouldn't make any difference for a straightforward sinner, right? Regardless, I repented every sin I could think of. I even made up a few for good measure. By doing so, maybe I'd save another soul from damnation. I could be extremely altruistic at the most self-opportune times.

I just hoped I'd enough time and memory to get the job done properly. *How did the saying go again?* I mentally inquired. *Thirty days hath September..... No, that's not it, you dumb-shit,* I chided myself. *Keep thinking Avery, you don't have much time.* Jesus, I couldn't remember the words to save my soul! I was in serious trouble with the Big Guy, again.

Just as my life was brilliantly flashing before my eyes, I heard short bursts of automatic weapons fire. Thank God almighty and Jesus and Mary too! My savior, the Rambo, had arrived in all his deadly glory for all to behold. I learned a minute later that Rex had snuck into the room and opened-up with two MAC 10 machine pistols on fully automatic settings. He instantly killed two Chiggers who mistakenly thought they could outgun or outrun him.

Three others sitting at a table held-up their hands in

surrender. Rex gunned them down too, without a second thought. He'd stuck it to them, big-time and had indiscreetly, impolitely, and abruptly pushed in their stools for the last time, figuratively speaking. Their lifeless bodies dropped to the floor before they even knew what nailed or ailed them. The Chiggers were down for the final count, no buts about it.

There was no sense of fair play in the CIA's Clandestine Service, especially for hired assassins of Middle Eastern origin. Rex had saved us in the nick of time as the clock's second-hand swept to midnight. Jesus, he'd soon have more medals than president-for-life Idi Amin, do-dah, do-dah. Unfortunately, Mr. Megaphone Man had escaped through a side-door during the commotion.

Allau Akbar! Ali Akbar had located the gang's hideout. It was in the basement of the *Id Gah Mosque* in central Kabul. The mosque was founded in the late 1800s and was said to be the largest temple in the country. The clever crooks had hidden their stash of cash and heroin in the safest spot in Afghanistan. The mosque was strictly off-limits to local government authorities, the Taliban, its Mujahedeen warriors, and certainly any and all U.S. government infidels. No one in their right mind would issue a search warrant for one of the holiest shrines in the country. It seemed that it was high time for Avery and company to attend church, regardless of what the building was mistakenly called.

Sometimes those who served and protected could demean, dissemble, and denigrate themselves for the greater good of staying alive to protect and serve another day.

CHAPTER 19

SWATTING THE MOSQUITOES

Kabul sat in a narrow valley wedged between the Hindu Kush Mountain and the Kabul River. The Id Gah Mosque straddled one bank at a shallow part of the river. That was where and how we would approach our target. We would violate the sanctity of this most holy sanctuary during Friday prayers. The G-2 provided by Ali indicated that the basement of the mosque was used as a madrassa or Islamic religious school. According to him, a hidden room there also contained the spoils and ill-gotten gains of the bad guy's most profitable enterprises.

At the school, the imam would spout the most

outrageous, twisted lies about America's aggressive war efforts to bring peace to that troubled land. Children would be shown photos of American icons to spit on and revile. The chief imam even went so far as to erect an effigy of Ronald McDonald and hang it from the ceiling. The poor kids were blindfolded, handed a wood stick and told to beat the crap out of Ronnie until he spilled chunks of dried goat liver at their feet. The imam disingenuously claimed that the treats were healthy since they were low in trans-fats. The youngsters were forced to swallow the falsehoods and treats alike.

The golden arches of a McDonald's were replicated many times over in one large room of the basement, joining to form a gigantic maze. The children would be placed at its center and cruelly prodded to find their way out of crass American consumerism. To make things more challenging, the overhead lights would be turned off. *It's a Small World* was played over and over again at full blast to disorient them. The incessant tune caused many of them to become queasy, gaseous and nauseous, and often resulted in vomiting and shitting themselves. The negative reinforcement seemed to be working given the smell of the place.

At the imam's stern direction, the youngsters would scoop up the mess and feed it to the goats that were patiently begging for handouts outside the mosque. His message was clear for all to hear—Allah's divine recycling plan was a miracle to behold. Goat, kid, goat, kid, goat—it was an endless cycle of replenishment for the starving children and beasts of Afghanistan. It was also a simple, elegant design for those who truly believed in its divinity.

We had to choreograph our black bag operation

carefully to avoid any missteps. Friday prayers would draw hundreds of worshipers to the mosque; a large Sunday gathering mistakenly held on the wrong day of the week. Each of us had an important role to play and if things didn't go like clockwork, we'd end up as defiled, dead meat on the altar of the mosque. Fortunately, none of us were exactly kosher products so we might have a slight chance of staying alive. We truly hoped our "use by" dates weren't about to expire anytime soon.

To help us remember our lines and parts, we came up with little ditties. We placed them in our cranial databanks for protection. We would instantly erase them if necessary to keep our secrets safe during any application of hostile interrogation. We would all carry strong, horseshoe magnets with us, just in case. These tidbits of unmemorable singsong would help guide our team's actions. It was timeless DS synchronicity and stealth at work.

We called Ahmed Al. Al would mingle with the goats outside the mosque and serve as point-man and lookout for the operation. He'd alert us to any problems before we entered the building. His ditty would be "Al's the kiddies pal, willy-nilly. Better watch out Billy or I'll gruffly bleat you silly."

Rashid was called Tony. He would be our getaway driver after we successfully pulled off our heist. His mantra was "Tony, Tony, Toyota pony, better hold your horses, Tony."

Rex was Rick. His job was to enter and secure the mosque to facilitate my entry to the basement. His pseudonym shtick was "Rickety-rack, clickety-clack, I'll put your sorry ass down as a matter of fact."

My handle du jour was Tyrone. I was responsible for

locating the loot and making off with as much as we could carry. My little jingle was “Tyrone no eat no pork. He no pork no pig. He be dah bro stealing dah bacon for dis here gig.”

We practiced our lines and roles over and over again for the next two hours. We had them down pat, except I didn’t understand a word of Rashid’s Farsi. But he’d put a broom between his legs and did a horsey, galloping routine to let us know he understood his part. I still didn’t understand his whinny, but I coveted his riding crop though.

Our team assembled just after lunch at a safe-house outside the city. We made sure we had all the gear to meet our well-thought-out objectives. We had grappling hooks, quantities of strong nylon rope, whatchamacallits, crampons, nimrods, tampons, thingamajigs and a little hemp to calm our nerves. We were loaded for bear, but, unfortunately, there were no ursa, either major or minor, in Kabul so we’d have to simply grin it.

I refused to take Joe Camel, our wannabe, bobble-headed savior. He had royally screwed us over the other night with the Chiggers. He didn’t give us a single warning bobble, a heads-up to avoid the ambush. He’d now have to feed his juju, voodoo, manna-laden crap to someone else who would swallow it whole and I was already fed-up.

Rashid dropped-off Ahmed a couple of blocks from the Id Gah Mosque. He understood the importance of his task and we relied on his favorable outlook. We were taken to the Kabul River about a half-mile upstream from the mosque. Rex and I donned our burkas and niqabs. I knew I had sworn that I’d never wear one, but expediency and necessity prevailed once again.

We didn't need a boat or waders to make our way to the mosque. The Kabul River was dry as a bone left to bake in the desert sands. Rain didn't come very often and the spring snow melts were still months away. The river had its charms though because it was a cesspool minus the water. Its bed and banks were chock-a-block with the most sorted and vile detritus imaginable. The sights and smells were overpowering, overwhelming, and over-the-top. The river Styx looked like a pristine, rippling mountain stream by comparison.

We put on our gas masks under our face masks. We probably looked like characters out of the *Night of the Living Dead*, but we didn't give a flying, freaking thought to it then. The carcasses of dead, partially-dead, deceased, living, live, partially-alive, decomposed and partially decomposed animals or every stench, stripe and description littered our path at every turn.

It was like trying to tiptoe through a minefield of crap without a shit-detector. I flashed on the comforting words of America's greatest living poet laureate for inspiration: "We're half-way there, living on a prayer. We'll make it, I swear." By Jove, my *bon ami*, you were absolutely spot-on. I now had a renewed strength and resolve to soldier-on through this manmade, surreal hellhole.

Even the garbage pickers of old Calcutta wouldn't touch this stuff with a ten foot pole attached to a ten foot pole. Any self-respecting Pole would turn up his nose at it too. We arrived nauseated, shaken, but alive at the mosque. I should've had a tetanus booster as someone had suggested. I had just risked life and limb for my government once again.

I was psychically impaired and paranoid at the moment. I decided not to even pick my own nose until I

thoroughly washed my thumbs. I considered washing in my own urine, but decided to save my precious bodily fluids for direr, thirstier circumstances. We'd been taught to draw on every conceivable resource and reserve to stay alive and get the job done. *The needs of the Service* stuff again. I wondered how much longer I must protect and serve before DS left me alone to my own vices and devices.

I looked towards Ahmed's position to get the all-clear signal to proceed with our plan. I saw him kneeling among his flock. He had spread a small sheepskin prayer rug on the ground in deference to his new-found friends. It was Muslim prayer time after all, but I was certain Ahmed later got his goat. He then gave the go-ahead signal we had practiced in less embarrassing times. But I had to admit that he had the look of prayer rug all over his face.

Rex made the first move by swinging a rope attached to a live, stray cat and grappling hook toward an open first-floor window. The cat hit the wall a bit short and ferociously clawed its way to the window. It jumped through to save its remaining lives. Rex firmly tugged on the rope until it was taut.

The confused cat started to run crazily around the room. It eventually wound itself and the hook around a piece of furniture. It would be secure enough to hold Rex's 220 pound frame. Rex climbed-up and dislodged the frazzled cat from the foot of an armoire. Only its pride remained intact. I suspected that many of its lives had just flashed across its mind. Rex tossed it to me from the window. I happened to be lighting a cigarette and missed catching it. In truth, I wouldn't miss it. There were plenty more where it came from. Afghanistan was no place for

pussies.

I attached the crampons to my wingtips and firmly jammed the tampons in both ears. I hated the sound of gunfire and its resulting screams of pain and anguish. I should be accustomed to such things after so many years in the State Department, but I still couldn't get over the pitiful sounds of the unworthy being passed-over for promotion. I easily scaled the wall and Rex and I regrouped and discussed our next steps. I needed to go down while he went up, but first we had to get by our first serious obstacle.

Rex garroted the Chigger standing guard outside our room with a piece of piano string—he was dead in a G-flat second. It was then that I noted that Rex was tightly wound and wired, but no worries. He would work out his Gordian knots later. As for the guard, the Fat Lady had just sung the final note of her aria.

I made my way down the stairs towards the basement. Rex had some extracurricular matters to attend to. My presence and burka didn't raise any eyebrows with the passing worshipers. I probably shouldn't have curtsied, but proper etiquette and decorum were never out of fashion. Eventually, I sashayed to and fro, by way of hither and yon, to the basement door—it was unlocked. These guys were a bunch of confident, cocky SOBs. So was I until I entered the room.

The first thing I saw shocked me to the core. It was Ronnie lying on the floor. His limp, lifeless body had been mutilated almost beyond recognition. His matted, orange-reddish hair had turned stark white. His finger and toenails had continued to grow to obscene lengths even in death. He looked like a ghastly, ghoulish clown that had gone bad. However, the grotesquerie wouldn't go

unpunished. I still wanted my damned change back that he'd promised me long ago!

Ronnie had become another fallen warrior in America's war on terrorism. My heart went out to him at that moment. I took two golden arches and placed them in the form of a lopsided cross over his desiccated body. I had great intellectual respect for St. Louis, the patron saint of arches, but I had a much deeper, gut respect for the satiable power of Mickey D's. Other than DS, I promised it would be my only other employer of last resort. My interrogation skills would come-in handy: "would you like fries with that burger, ma'am?"

I searched the building's large basement high-and-low, up-and-down, side-to-side, top-to-bottom and didn't find anything of interest on my first pass. I carefully examined the place inch-by-inch looking for hidden doors or concealed passageways. I was deflated and de-hyphenated at that point. The life-size crèche with baby Jesus on the far-side of one oversized room piqued my interest for some irrational reason. Maybe it was because Joseph was missing from the family portrait. He might have been forcibly drafted by the Mujahedeen for all I knew. I wasn't sure, so I looked closer. The figures of the baby lambs looked very lifelike and good enough to eat. Regrettably, I didn't have a spit left since I'd lost it sometime ago along with my salivation.

Although I admitted to a fondness for French cuisine, I wasn't hungry for plaster of Paris under glass. I took out a magnifying glass and scrutinized the figures. I looked them up and down for any signs that they might be Muslim mimes, a classic Chigger trick. If you weren't careful, you could be bludgeoned to death by one of these rigid stiffs. But I wasn't about to take any chances

with them. However, in deference to their posturing, I would maintain a stiff upper lip in their presence. After awhile, it became obvious that the figures weren't mimes, unless they were stalling for time, but I just didn't have the patience to play their waiting games. I knew for a fact that none of figures were named Godot.

The whole set up reminded me of a diabolical training camp for Muslim kids to defile and desecrate America's preeminent consumer icon and the religion of our forefathers combined. The evil imam had constructed a blasphemous madrassa of hatred and cruelty for the young and impressionable of Afghanistan. No wonder there wasn't a single McDonald's in the entire country. Very few churches as well. The depressing scene was almost too much to bear.

I respectfully moved each figure to see if there was some sort of covert device to unlock the entrance to a hidden room. That was when Mother Mary lost her head. I gave it a little nudge and it started wildly rotating about her neck and spewing split pea soup all over the crèche. The crèche swept aside to reveal what I was searching for. I noticed a glaring light coming from the huge opening in the wall where the crèche had once stood guard. It was the entrance to Ali Baba and his forty thieves' hidden lair and I excitedly moved in with my Glad trash bags in tow.

I quickly scarfed-up abundant amounts of cash and opium. I filled four large bags and changed into my Santa suit. I rolled up the burka and stuffed it under my costume for extra girth. In the Saint Nick of time, I had remembered my old adage: "Everything had value or utility under the right circumstances." I just hoped these were words to live by rather than die for. I now looked like

Father Christmas with a pronounced paunch. I somehow had to explain the carry-along bags in order to make a plausible and safe getaway. I prayed the locals celebrated Christmas or liked foreign fat guys wearing red suits and white beards. However, my mind raced with the consequences of being caught.

I fretted about getting beaten with sticks and being stoned to death with lumps of coal. Merry Christmas Avery! Oh, and by the way, don't worry about a happy new year you fucking infidel. Ho, ho, ho, my jolly friend. Would you like a cig before you're beheaded?

It was time to call Rex and tell him we were ready to roll. Our tactical communications equipment was simple, but effective. It consisted of the latest technology the organization could offer its field agents. Rex had found two soup cans and rigged them together with leftover piano wire, making sure they were off-label brands. They were much superior in terms of clarity and connectivity. However, I still worried about the goats trying to get their licks in and this wasn't supposed to be a party-line or a goat-rope.

Like a ship's captain, I blew into the can to get a connection. I was concerned the Chiggers might be listening in so I'd have to talk around the subject to confuse them. I got Rex on my fourth huff and I'd chide him later about his phone etiquette. I told him it was time to *vamoose*. Other than *papoose*, it was the only bit of Navajo code-talk I knew. I thought *papoose* would be too childish to use under the circumstances.

I then walked upstairs and hooked-up with Rex. I gave him a big thumbs-up sign. He gave me two in return—just

two cool dudes in the digital age. We would vamoose the same way we ventured in; down the rope and to a great escape and job well-done. With my bags and getup, I felt like Christmas was just around the corner. I was one jolly Santa and couldn't wait for the "ho, ho, ho" to arrive. They'd never been late before.

We slid our way down the rope and casually walked the short distance to the mosque's enormous parking lot. I couldn't immediately locate Rashid and his taxi among the many camel carriages, unbridled one-horse shays and donkey carts. It seemed that small kids made a bundle of money currying favors each Friday. Then I heard Rashid's signal. It consisted of a series of loud blasts from his car's air horn to the tune *Born in the USA*. We ran to the sound and threw the engorged bags into the trunk. Ahmed quickly joined us and it was almost time to make our exit, but not quite.

Rex handed me the remote garage door opener and let me do the honors. As we pulled away, I pressed the button and there was a huge, ear-shattering explosion caused by the C-4 shape charges Rex had placed against the base of the mosque's sixty foot high minaret. That was where the mullahs would call-out prayers over many large and powerful loudspeakers. *Loud* was the operative word. They had awakened me on numerous occasions with their incomprehensible blabber. It was especially annoying on Sundays when God and I rested. It was a rude, inconsiderate act, particularly to an important guest in their country.

The tower did a half-gainer and folded on top of itself. Dust and smoke filled the entire area making our getaway that much easier. That was how the cookies crumbled in my unconstructive job.

That was payback for blowing up Buddha in 2001, you Islamo-fascist, heathen bastards, I thought. Go back where you came from. I'm sure the Governor of Michigan will welcome you with open arms!

Boy or boy, I really blew off some righteous Christian steam.

My sacred act of retribution would stand as a phallic symbol to Lorena Bobbitt and other American Christian warriors of all faiths. It would pole-vault me ahead of lesser creatures in my ever-evolving, next life. I gripped myself between the legs to make sure I was still wholesome. I really felt good about myself since I wasn't down or depressed for a change.

Tomorrow was D-Day—Dick Day. That was when certain previously named persons would feel the business-end of Avery Dick's pitiless lance. *Bend down before me baby and feel my willful wrath. Apocalypse was coming to a theater in your neighborhood,*" I mused. Even though it would be daylight, I'd be a knight errant saddled on the back of a huge white steed.

I would let my few hairs freely blow in the wind as I galloped headlong to my preordained destiny. I would laugh in the face of danger, adversity and anything else daring to cross the wide-swath of my broad pathway. I'd ride hard and naked through the chancery grounds gobbling overpriced chocolates while chasing down those shielded much too long from Lady Liberty's chain-mailed fist. I promised that my performance wouldn't be second class in any respect. I was certainly no Crusader Rabbit wuss.

Sometimes those who served and protected could be

very scary, medieval motherfuckers when forgetting to take their meds.

CHAPTER 20

SWEEPING UP DRAGON DROPPINGS

I had chosen to wear my charcoal gray suit and put on a white shirt backwards. It was time for Father Avery to force an involuntary confession. I planned to brace Larry Bumpkiss and brace him strongly with all the fury I could muster. I had made arrangements for Chuck Tanner to assist me—he disliked Larry and that helped. I also wanted a witness to our little get together. Chuck was a now a short-timer whose mood and mental health had improved markedly in the past few weeks. *Time heals all wounds*, as DS never says. That was because memories

of personal and professional slights were much too bright and lasting in the outfit.

I took my Asp with me just in case. For the cop-show challenged, that was a collapsible metal baton, not a poisonous snake. I didn't think I'd need it, but I would keep it handy just in case Larry got uppity during the confrontational interview. But I guessed Larry would be an easy mark. Cops and federal agents were terrible at keeping a straight face under questioning since they were the world's worst liars.

I met with Chuck outside the chancery and briefed him on what was going on and down. We then entered Larry's office and slammed the door to get his attention. I Mirandized him before he could say a word.

After he peeled himself off the ceiling, he asked "What the hell are you doing barging into my office? You didn't even knock, you conceited, inconsiderate dick. Chuck, get out of here before I throw you out."

His ranting suggested that he wanted to speak to me alone. Chuck refused to budge by staying glued to his chair.

I jerked the offensiveness back in my direction. "Larry, you're one guilty SOB. It's clearly written all over your face. Just take a look."

He took a pocket mirror from his desk drawer and held it in front of his face. He gazed a long time at his reflection. "Okay, Avery, it's written there, but you still can't spell worth a damn you ignorant ignoramus."

Larry was a tough-talker, but only time would tell if he would be a tough perp walker.

"Okay, you got me," he finally admitted. He said he looked guilty on the face of it. "But you're still one piss poor wordsmith," he lamely commented. I didn't care

since it was still close enough for government work in my book.

“Larry, that’s a distinction without a difference, much like your DS career.” He damn well knew it too.

“My pal, this is no 4-H spelling bee, it’s the threshing one,” I continued. “You’re being harvested, compacted, and baled. The sun’s no longer shining on your haymaking. Your cows have finally come home to roost, you greedy swine,” I informed him in my best mixed metaphors. I just couldn’t resist using farm imagery and homey homilies in such circumstances. Animal husbandry was one of my favorite subjects in school.

I laid it thickly on him before he could collect his wits. “I’ve got you nailed seven ways to Sunday with a long list of crimes. You’ve probably already tallied up the crime time in your mind. It’s a lot of years, no matter how you add the numbers.”

“However, there’s one crime that’s going to tear you a new one Larry—treason. Yeah, treason, you unscrupulous fuck. You and your moronic colleagues committed treason, whether you appreciate the finer points of the law or not.”

“You went way too far in drug-dealing with the sheik. The DEA and Multilateral Coalition Forces have irrefutable evidence that significant sums of money from the opium trade are funneled to Taliban and Mujahedeen coffers to buy goodwill and protection for the traffickers. They use the monies to buy weapons and fund the insurgency our country is fighting.”

Larry’s face was ashen and sweating. Surprisingly, it wasn’t a Wednesday and the room was air conditioned. He slumped in his chair and tried to look invisible. The old DS camouflage trick didn’t work on me.

“Larry, you’re responsible for facilitating and supporting the killing of Americans. Remember, Afghanistan is officially designated a war zone,” I formally spoke. “How much sympathy can you wring out of a judge or jury on that charge alone?” I let him absorb the impact of the statement and then dropped the insult that went with the injury.

“Oh gosh, oh golly Larry, don’t forget, treason is one of the very few non-homicide federal crimes that can result in the death penalty.”

It was wham, bam, thank you, ma’am in quick succession. I let him visualize the noose tightening around his scrawny neck as the potassium cyanide solution rushed down his IV tube while he squirmed in the lap of Old Sparky. The awaiting firing squad would correct any technical glitches.

Larry quickly collapsed under the weighty evidence I had placed on his weakened shoulders. He immediately did what any good DS agent would do under the same circumstances. He dropped to his knees, grabbed mine and begged forgiveness. By that, I meant that he wondered aloud if I could see my way to politely intercede on his behalf with the U.S. attorney in Alexandria, Virginia. Maybe I could persuade him or her to reduce his sentence in return for full and complete cooperation. In plain-speak, he was more than willing to rat out the others, but only as a good citizen and not a self-serving, corrupt government official.

The federal court in Alexandria, Virginia would have jurisdiction since Larry would return to the U.S. via Dulles International Airport. Of course, that was if a more ambitious AUSA didn’t steal the case first. That was done if a particular case had pizzazz and great sex appeal.

There was no honor among U.S. attorneys regarding such important, career enhancing legal matters. I told Larry that I couldn't guarantee anything, but we joined pinkies as a gesture of good faith. He then spilled his bean-filled gut all over my clean wingtips, figuratively speaking, of course.

He related his story without script or shame. He said he'd noticed early-on some billing irregularities in Ajax's monthly invoices. He confirmed that all invoices had to be personally approved by him before payment. He picked up on the fact that the hours billed and the number of bodies claimed didn't jibe. It turned out that Larry did do his homework; he simply cheated on the tests. He claimed he'd confronted Tommy Thompson with his findings.

Tommy reclaimed by saying that any irregularities amounted to nothing more than minor mathematical or clerical errors. They were of no real consequence in the overall scheme of things. The scheme of things was then offered to Larry on a silver platter. He agreed to grab a portion of its contents by being cut-in on the scam. That solved the problem and there were never any billing errors after that since the books always balanced, right down to the penny. Larry was collecting \$50K a month for writing his signature, but I didn't tell him that both he and Uncle Sam were getting ripped off.

He went on to tell us he would also vouch for the Defense Base Act claims for ghost worker deaths, injuries and disabilities. He received a flat twenty-five percent of each DBA claim and commented that he was wholly satisfied with the arrangement. He had socked away a bundle of money for his forthcoming retirement. It seems he planned to open a game reserve in Idaho with

some of his buddies. There, they'd live the life of modern-day hunters and gatherers. That meant they would slaughter dumb, defenseless critters to their heart's content. He thought he would renew his federal firearms license as well since there were still plenty of potential Johns in the birches of northern Idaho.

He started having second thoughts when the group decided to expand its operations into drug-dealing. He asserted he wasn't overly greedy, but the others were. He eventually acquiesced to their demands out of peer pressure and overarching avarice. He asserted that he wasn't greedy, just avaricious. That was how Foreign Service officers typically expressed differences in meanings and perceptions.

He had agreed to assemble goodie bags, the classified pouches, for those who served as mules and middle men in the caper. He'd also made occasional runs to Istanbul and Hong Kong for the operation. It was an easy task for him since the bags were readily available in the chancery storeroom. The non-professional courier letters were simple to forge. All it took was some fancy, embassy-embossed, letterhead stationery along with an illegible signature. There was virtually no chance a courier would be stopped or questioned by the authorities anywhere in the world. The stage props were just too damn good to be detected as being bogus.

I asked how long Tommy Thompson had been running the show. He hesitated and looked at me very oddly; he then spoke what I had guessed some time ago. Tommy wasn't bright or clever enough to pull off scams of such complexity and magnitude. Ambrose Pierce was the ring leader, kingfish, and *capo di tutti capi* of all these scams and scamsters. He had inherited the whole operation

from his predecessor, a fully dark Dragon, who was now comfortably retired in Costa del Sol. He was still being paid a retainer as mentor and technical advisor to Ambrose. The plot just sickened. I didn't like the cut of Ambrose's clothes when we first met. Things didn't quite jibe or jive with him. Looking back, I should've jabbed rather than jibbed much earlier in my investigation.

"Tell me what was up with the voodoo skit out in the sticks," I asked.

He explained the location was merely a randomly selected spot where the conspirators could freely talk. The burkas and niqabs were perfect costumes for disguising themselves if anyone accidentally came upon them. Someone had thought up the burning-cross-with-the-dollar-sign shtick as a joke. It became a good luck ritual to ensure that the buck wouldn't stop there. They enjoyed the symbolism and had actually started to believe the worshiping exerted positive karma on their criminal endeavors. It had started as a bit of nonsense, but gradually morphed into the centerpiece of their meetings. He said that in hindsight, the whole thing was loony, lame and laughable. I didn't question Larry's veracity, only his sanity.

"Tell me about the Chiggers. What was their role in your sleazy operation?"

"That's simple," he replied. "The Chiggers provided the muscle and, on occasion, the necessary wet-work to facilitate our enterprise. They served as guards for our stash of cash and drugs. They were our intermediaries for the payment of baksheesh to local officials. As you probably know, Chiggers have no sense of loyalty to anything or anyone other than themselves. They operate as a ruthless, self serving organization and offer their

services to the highest bidder. Actually, they turned out to be a perfect fit for what we were doing.”

He swore up and down and side to side that he wasn't responsible for the attempts on my life. He also said he never touched my fine feathered friend, Fred. He laid everything at Tommy Thompson's clodhoppers. He admitted that he'd heard of the incidents, but only after the fact. He averred that he had some qualms about coldly murdering a fellow federal agent. He chalked it up to professional courtesy. I wanted to believe him. If he hadn't killed me over the promotion list gifts or my investigation into his gunrunning, he'd not likely do me in over a few million dollars and serious jail time. Maybe it made sense in a DS nonsensical way.

“You're relieved of duties effective now,” I announced. “The decision comes from the top.” Chuck immediately jumped out of his chair, thrust both arms in the air, and whooped a loud YES from the top of his lungs. “Chuck, I'm talking about Larry, not you. Sit down and shut up!” He quickly composed himself and sullenly sat down again.

Larry didn't doubt that the decision came from Washington. At that point, he was totally dejected and deflated from our little dialogue. I instructed Chuck to seize Larry's gun, credentials and passports. I next arranged for the RSO staff to set up 24/7 shifts to guard him. I warned Larry not to use the phone or computer or otherwise communicate with anyone, but me. If he did, I'd drop a dime and he'd do full time for the full crime. We'd keep him incommunicado until we could get him on a plane back to the States. Unofficially, he was on a suicide watch. I meant Chuck in this instance, not Larry.

The next one on my hit parade was Ambrose Pierce

who was three floors up. It would be a short perp walk and I went alone. What I was about to tell Ambrose wasn't fit for a young agent's wet ears. I charged into his office without knocking or asking "Mother may I?" He wasn't shocked, just taken aback. Nothing shocks Foreign Service officers other than missing the cut on the promotion list. However, after doing a couple of aback flips, he demanded to know what I was doing in his office without an appointment and a fresh manicure. His face actually turned a bright, beet red—much like if he'd been caught masturbating in public. This was much too humiliating for him because he'd rather be dead than red.

I sat down and casually lit a cigarette. I wanted to smoke him out, but in a second handed manner. I picked up a dated copy of the *Foreign Service Journal* from his Ethan Allen coffee table and casually thumbed through a few pages.

"Put that out!" he screamed.

I didn't and waited a bit longer by blowing a couple of smoke-rings in his direction before blurting out "Ambrose, you're the Anti-Christ and I'm God's lightning bolt. I'll smite you while you quiver in my presence."

I loved invoking the names of over-the-top religious figures during such circumstances. Jesus, who was a better authority figure to lord over someone?

I quickly summarized the evidence against him and the others. He was silent for a couple of minutes while gathering his wits and thoughts. He did what most weak-kneed sycophants do in such circumstances and pleaded the mantra of others confronted with similar incriminating evidence.

"I swear to God, I wasn't in the loop, didn't even see the loop" he cried. "What's a loop?"

I'd heard the lame, loopy excuse a time or two before. For the record, I'd used the same inane defense a time or two as well. I didn't mind selling, but I sure wasn't buying today. He continued with his pathetic excuses by telling me he would never willingly consort with a person named *Bumpkiss*. I heard a faint ring of truth in his assertion since pedigree and genealogy were hot-button topics in the Foreign Service. It was a wholly plausible argument from that perspective, but no other. Ambrose was guilty as sin.

It was obvious he wasn't about to confess his misdeeds to an inferior human being and subordinate; however, it didn't make any difference since he was totally Avery-ed. Two tough-looking Marine security guards unceremoniously marched Ambrose to his apartment. He would stay there until we were ready to move him to the land of the free and the brave. He wouldn't be a disciplinary problem for the Marines. Administered properly, soap on a rope leaves no abrasions or contusions on guilty Dragon hides.

As I spoke to Larry and Ambrose, Dan Sykes talked to his counterparts throughout the world. Bank accounts were frozen, people arrested, and large amounts of drugs and money seized. I had put out an APB on Tommy Thompson earlier that morning. No one had seen hide, nor hair, nor scale of Tommy in the past twenty-four hours. We would run him to ground later and I'd then skin him alive. I hummed a few bars of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," before leaving the building.

Sometimes those who served and protected liked to finish their Uncle Sam's work on a positive, upbeat note.

An embassy press conference was hastily called for

precisely 2:00 PM. Media turnout was high because the reporters smelled something foul in the air. They didn't realize at the time it was the stench of dragon droppings.

Without preamble, Ambassador Heinz Caldwell read from a prepared statement.

"I deeply regret to advise that Deputy Chief of Mission Ambrose Pierce and senior Regional Security Officer Larry Bumpkiss have been confined to their respective quarters on the embassy compound. This was done as a matter of overabundant caution to protect the embassy staff and general population against a highly contagious disease."

He explained that Ambrose and Larry were lovers who had failed to practice safe sex. Regrettably, they'd both contracted the dreaded *romantic fervor*, a disease that had decimated the gay populations of many developing nations. The tests conducted by the embassy's medical officer confirmed Stage II fervor and the symptoms suggested they were both hot and bothered.

"As everyone understands, there's no magic bullet or cure for the disease. However, plenty of bed rest and fluids are strongly recommended for the best prophylactic effect," he boldly related to the world press and local officials. Ambassador Caldwell went on to say that the pair would be medically evacuated to the States as soon as possible for further treatment. He stressed there was no need for the public to be alarmed about contagion.

"We firmly believe that Larry and Ambrose successfully nipped things in the bud early on in their relationship, so no worries my good friends," he said.

"I'd now like to propose a moment of silent prayer for the speedy recovery of these two brave American sodomites." Heads immediately and obediently lowered

in respect.

“Thank you for your loving, heartfelt thoughts,” he added seconds later.

“It’s important to set the record straight on this issue—homosexuality is neither an illness nor character flaw for those who serve our nation abroad. Separation from a significant other is to be expected during one’s career. Our male officers are simply *sans woman*, as we say. Foreign Service life is little different than serving time in prison—except it lacks the positive, disciplinary aspects of a regimented work routine, along with proper grooming and personal hygiene standards.”

“I readily acknowledge that such activity may constitute a crime in many countries where we serve, but that’s why God gave us diplomatic immunity, the promise of abstinence, and two strong hands to see us through the ordeal.”

“To the contrary,” he proclaimed, “I believe most officers by speech and mannerism alone suggest asexuality—at best. It’s what we strive for in America’s gender-blinded, neutered, LGBT dominated Foreign Service establishment. By the way, the acronym is useful if you’re looking to speed dial someone for a quickie,” he hastily noted.

“However, I must caution our young officers that open gaiety must be avoided at all costs. Of course, ass kissing a superior in public doesn’t count for squat in our line of work. It’s an expected and respected tradition since the founding of the State Department. Our forefather, Thomas Jefferson, would be proud to learn what’s been accomplished over the past two hundred plus years.”

In closing, his eminence hummed *America the*

Beautiful to the crowd using his pocket comb wrapped in a piece of wax paper. Using his ersatz Jew's harp to play *Deutschland Uberalıs* would have been an inappropriate selection under the circumstances.

It was abundantly evident to the crowd that Ambassador Heinz Caldwell was a talented diplomat, a man of the world, and, most importantly, an accomplished mouth organist. By the looks on their faces, the attendees were either awestruck or dumbstruck by his performance, depending on the progression of their gullibility or dementia. But he was a real crowd pleaser in any event.

I couldn't add anything to the ambassador's presentation nor did I want to. He'd said it all. It was more of the over-the-top nonsense that I'd heard many times before from more talented talking heads. The drivel never ended and the rhetoric never stopped, but I didn't care. I was heading home at last.

Sometimes those who served and protected couldn't get a word in edgewise or otherwise if their sexual orientation depended on it.

AFTERWORD

The State Department was still in business. It wasn't brought down or slowed up by our inconsequential investigation. The Black Dragons successfully hushed up the matter and U.S. foreign policy continues apace. Nothing changed except there were now a few people doing some serious time for their crimes. Here was the scoop for those who needed the latest poop. By the way, this was solely my perspective on the retrospective, but I admitted I liked writing revisionist history.

Ambrose Pierce was forcibly flown to the United States where an arrest warrant and several U.S. Marshals awaited him at Dulles International Airport. He was escorted home by agent Rex Gallant. Ambrose was highly upset, indignant, and agitated; almost choking to death at one point on his own bile and unmitigated gall. It turned out that he had to be chemically restrained during the flight. While sedated, he incoherently babbled about

the Gulf of Tonkin incident and Israel's mistaken attack on a U.S. warship during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and other trivial matters. Thank God he didn't remember the Maine! That would have been too over-the-top even for a mature Gray Dragon like Ambrose. He then made outrageous comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam and continued to blurt and babble about foreign affairs fiascos. He was inadvertently spewing Dragon secrets all over himself and the resulting disgorgement was disgusting and overly verbose.

Rex ignored the confused, befuddled rants and raves about American foreign policy failures. Jesus, who cared these days? There were no lessons to be learned here. In disgust and frustration, agent Gallant finally gagged Ambrose. He then put on his headphones and got lost in his techno-trance music for the rest of the flight. Uncle Sam couldn't care less about how a fugitive arrived on U.S. soil and it wasn't a legal problem in any sense. Ambrose could try to sue the government for violating his civil rights, but that would be after he served twelve years in a federal prison. He also had no hope of making money from his memoirs. Any profits from a book or film would be seized or blocked by the government. There were no more aspirations left for Ambrose M. Pierce III. But in a sense, he might get his lifelong wish. He would likely serve as an ambassador-at-large on an ersatz federal grant at one of our nation's super max institutions. Of course, his appointment wouldn't require U.S. Senate approval, only an order from a federal judge. But his personal portfolio would be limited to fending off undiplomatic advances from other inmates. His chances of scoring an early parole were not appealing.

Larry Bumpkiss cut a plea deal with the U.S. attorney's

office by testifying against his co-conspirators. He was now serving a twenty-eight month sentence at a minimum security federal correctional facility in Idaho: a Club Fed. He got a small last laugh though. His household effects were shipped free-of-charge by the department to Sandpoint, Idaho, his home leave address of record. Larry would have a relatively easy transition from federal convict to local citizen. He most assuredly would have a job, some pocket money, and a roof over his head when he got out. He wouldn't receive his government pension, but he would be able to survive by his own wits and skills as taught to him by his political brethren in northern Idaho.

Tommy Thompson fled home to the United Kingdom before we could grab him. He was now awaiting extradition to the United States for his crimes. He'd worked as a security guard at an Arthur Treacher's shop in south Liverpool for awhile to make ends meet. Perhaps, he'd finally gotten his fill of codpieces. If not, there were many more to fill his appetite in prison. Tommy was simply waiting for his chips to fall. I suspected it wouldn't be too long for that to happen.

Irena Kommuniski wasn't charged because I concluded that she was really a not-so-bright, unwitting dupe of Tommy Thompson. I also concluded that she was one incredible fuck. She moved back to Minsk to put her gymnastic talents to good use. She was now the top pole-dancer in the most exclusive gentlemen's club in the city. She raked in huge amounts of money for performing on stage. Irena raked in even more money from private performances for gentlemen with generous tips.

Ambassador Heinz Caldwell retired from the Foreign Service with full accolades and honors befitting his

rankness. He was running for office on the American Bund Party ticket and hoped to head up its men's glee club. He was curtly reminding everyone of his advanced mental condition: *Waldheimer's Disease*. You surely remember that particularly Germanic affliction. It thoughtfully makes one forget he was a Nazi. Fortunately, he can still remember to put on his *lederhosen* in the morning and goose-step to the fifty-seven varieties of German oldies playing on his ancient Victrola.

Ali Akbar got his money and wish, but he overstayed his visa in Las Vegas and was now a wanted fugitive from American justice. He was somewhere on the Strip getting the red carpet treatment. But he'd only get away with his little amusements until the feds pulled the rug out from under him. Once a week, like clockwork, his wives visited the consular officials at the embassy in Kabul and demanded to talk to the dick who did this to them. Moreover, they constantly bitched about the shoddy dental work done at Ali's cousin's blacksmith shop. Obviously, they hadn't properly braced themselves for the fact there were no modern appliances in Afghanistan.

Rex Gallant was still working at the embassy in Islamabad where he continued to hone his hands-on skills while awaiting onward assignment. He was a bright, shooting star in DS and destined for bigger and better things in the organization. That was if he didn't choke first.

Ahmed Chollowby opened a KFC franchise between the airport and the embassy. Instead of Colonel Sanders wearing his trademark white Stetson hat, he'd adorned himself with a kaffiyeh headdress, looking down from a large billboard next to the store. From the sign, he

informed Afghans in Arabic, Pashto and Farsi that his chicken was finger-licking good. He also politely reminded them to use only their right hand while eating. Business was reportedly brisk.

Dan Sykes was still the Assistant IG for Investigations. He received a Superior Honor Award for his and his team's work on the investigation. The Iraq portion of the task force identified about thirty-four million dollars in fraudulent billings to the department. The guilty were being punished or running for public office. Dan continued to bring down bad guys and sometimes a Black Dragon or two. I still corresponded with him from time-to-time to keep up with the latest department gossip.

Jersey Briggs was subsequently promoted to the coveted DS slot at NATO as director of security. This was in recognition of the pivotal role he played in the investigation. He had quickly touted his exploits to the DS front office. In turn, DS cranked up its public relations machine and scooped the IG once again in the media. That act alone garnered more kudos for Jersey. I

still occasionally mailed him women's panties, just to keep him on his toes. That was what good friends did to rag on each other. I would remain his good friend even after his divorce from Beth is finalized. Jersey got me back though. He entered my name into Interpol's International Terrorist Watch List database while I was still overseas. Consequently, I suffered a serious identity crisis upon landing on U.S. soil. I still owe him big time for that little prank.

I was doing okay, thank you. To tie a loose, pretty ribbon on things, I believed I was no longer a danger to myself or others, but my alter-egos had been worrisomely quiet lately. I'd like to know what was going on in their

twisted, collective psyches, but those thoughts scared me to death. That was why I kept a loaded gun under my pillow for self-protection. It was a comforter in case one of them decided to act up or out. They'd better watch their steps if I were them!

Looking back, I slew one sizable, rapacious Gray Dragon and a couple dragonettes as well. I knew more clever ones would continue to despoil the foreign environment by dumping their dung onto the garden spots of this developing world. However, truth, justice, and the American way triumphed in this instance. I was terribly pleased and I should have been. With all the Dragon droppings, I now had full employment for as long as I wanted or could tolerate.

Speaking of which, the State Department, Foreign Service, and my own organization, the Diplomatic Security Service, still remained the best assisted living employers one could hope to work for and I was eagerly looking forward to my next adventure. Yes, I was still a proud dick—an Avery Dick, to put one big, fat, exclamation point on the end of it!

I had been to the mountaintop, yet I'd understood nothing. I'd shouted out the same question people have asked over and over again through the millennia: "*What the fuck's going on?*"

The answer returned on the cruel lips of the wind: "*there are no heroes in this world Avery, only pathetic dicks like you—move on and get a life bud!*" I'd much rather have settled for *Rosebud* or something equally inane and cryptic.

Sometimes we Americans were consistently, constant immutable and unchangeable human beings. Sometimes those who served and protected were too.

