

Dick Scalps the Injuns

Richard Avery

A Dick Avery Adventure Story

Foreword

Is anyone looking over your shoulder? I hope not because what I have to tell in this story may shock you—the reader.

This story takes place in India and involves the kidnapping of the American Ambassador's daughter in Delhi. Of course, there's much more to the plot. It writhes and wriggles like a hyperactive anaconda riding an out-of-control rollercoaster at Disney World. I think that means it twists and turns a lot in the telling, but without constricting or ingesting the reader.

I also must warn you that there are instances of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll strewn throughout the book so it's not something to be read lightly by the prudishly fainthearted. That's because sometimes those who protect and serve must strip-off life's pretentious veneer to discover the whole truth and nothing but the truth. However, finding truth in the federal government is often an iffy thing because there's always some fibbing going on with the bureaucrats. Truthfully, it's simply a matter of sorting out their lies from the prevarications. Ironically, they often use the most politically incorrect agents (that's where I come in) to help them maintain their own political correctness.

This is my second recall from retirement by my former employer, the Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State. I'm starting to detect an uncomfortable pattern here. It seems that no one else will take the assignments I'm offered and for good reason. They are all fraught with consequence and danger and I mean to Foreign Service careers.

I don't have one of those things anymore so I'm considered an expendable and disposable commodity by the organization. By the way, those are great attributes when you're playing the scapegoat for the big suits in the department. I've even started calling myself Avery the Goat Boy so no one misunderstands my role in these things.

I'm also needy--not emotionally, just financially. I need to make a quick buck off Uncle Sam while I still can. You see, I'm getting a little long-in-the-tooth as some might suggest for this kind of work. However, you should also be aware that I still have some bite left. That's another reason why the higher-ups keep hiring me back.

They know I'm a stubborn Rottweiler with an attitude when it comes to solving the tough cases. But I also take these risky assignments in order to defend truth, justice, and the American way. I must be a bit masochistic since I simply can't turn them down for patriotic or pecuniary reasons. Sometimes those who protect and serve are true red, white and blue public servants down to the cores of their overdrawn checkbooks.

So, please join me as I travel the world on behalf of the Diplomatic Security Service and uphold truth, justice and the American way!

Sincerely yours,

Richard M. Avery, III

Special Agent (ret.)
Diplomatic Security Service
U.S. Department of State

Chapter 1

Swallowing Pickled Herring

“Any ransom demands so far?” I inquired.

“No, not yet,” he replied. “We have not had any contact from the kidnapers. We’re obviously expecting something in the way of demands, but no communication at this point. The proof of life factor comes into play too as you well know.”

I must be a hungry glutton for punishment because I was seated before the Director of Investigations and Counterintelligence, Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State (and yes he likes that plenipotentiary and the extraordinary accolades that entails), and ever-so-politely holding my begging bowl in front of me.

I was flat broke and needed money to support my precarious standard of living. The cost of staples such as booze, cigarettes, and classy women had all become too expensive on my meager government pension. While I fully embraced consumerism as a true American value, I wasn’t a cheap date.

Unfortunately, Jersey Briggs accommodated my pathetic plea for more porridge by dropping red herrings into my bowl and I didn’t like their taste one bit. Fishy would have been a good descriptor.

I certainly wasn’t going to bite the hand that was offering to feed me once again, but I wasn’t going to swallow my chum whole either. Even in my desperate straits, I resented an obvious slight-of-hand job from a former colleague and sometime friend.

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The question was why? I thought. Why would Jersey spin a story he damn well knew I wouldn't buy? The answer was all too obvious: he had to hew to the bureaucratic script, no matter how lame it sounded to both of us. It wasn't so much what he was telling me since I had accepted much of it at face value. It was the stuff he was leaving out that bothered me most.

The devil is in the detail as some inane State Department pundit might say. I didn't want to get fired before I got back on the department's gravy train and headed for the lounge car. That wasn't my metaphor, but Jersey's. According to him, the choo-choo train with my name on it was pulling out of the station and I'd better get aboard if I ever wanted to work for DS again. Okay Jersey, I think I can, I think I can, I laughed to myself. And that was why I was here. He badly needed someone to pull the outfit's train. I was desperate for money and Jersey sensed my pecuniary neediness. Ok, all aboard folks!

"Avery, I know we've had our little differences in the past, but we need to put all the baggage behind us and work together. You're not much of a team player, but you've got to cooperate and coordinate your investigation with headquarters; that means me, specifically, like it or not. Otherwise, you'll be fired at once."

I viscerally responded to his hollow threat by opening my eyes. He had gotten my attention with that line and I sat a bit more erect in my chair.

Jersey continued telling his tall tale: "She was being driven to class at the International School of Delhi. The ISD caters to foreign kids whose parents comprise the top echelons of the international business community and diplomatic enclave in the Indian capital. Reportedly, the embassy chauffeur followed a predictable travel routine. He should have known to vary the routes and times to keep the opposition off balance. As you know

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very well, it's still one of the best and easiest countermeasures against being jacked or, in this instance, napped.”

I didn't correct him, but he should have added “hi kid” to the beginnings of those last words. They might have better befitted the circumstances. Maybe that was what the bad guys first said to the ambassador's daughter as she was being forced out of her vehicle at gunpoint.

“Maybe the driver thought it was a sobriety checkpoint,” I interjected. “The cops are really cracking down these days in India. I read that thirty-two percent of the traffic fatalities are due to drunk driving and the remainder to ordinary stupidity.” Of course, I made that stuff up out of whole cloth to bolster my credibility. Not surprisingly, my whole cloth was much too transparent, even for Jersey.

He shot me a dirty look and rolled his eyes at the same time. He could simultaneously chew gum too since Jersey was a multitalented DS agent. That was how he ascended so quickly in the department hierarchy. That and the fact he was good at kissing ass at the right time and in the right place. The place was easy to locate, but the timing was more difficult. He had to find targets of opportunity that could enhance his career and he had an uncanny knack for such things. Regardless, Jersey was a natural butt-boy, a successful agent, and a rising star in the organization. And I was envious.

“It's just basic Security 101 stuff, even absent any specific security concerns. Obviously, we still don't get the message through to some,” Jersey mentioned to no one in particular. He completely ignored my earlier interruption and clever theory of the crime.

He was certainly right about the message though. Following department security procedures and protocols was a huge pain in

the ass. They conflicted head-on with our innate sense of independence, individuality, and invincibility.

One of the biggest misconceptions about terrorists was the notion that they were all created equal, but they were most definitely not. For every trained, skilled, dedicated and savvy bad guy out there, there were two or three others who were bumblers of the first order. They sometimes made the most stupid mistakes imaginable and didn't succeed in bagging their intended quarry.

Unless the target was a well-known official or personality, these little failures and fiascos usually got no more than a few lines under the fold of an inside section of the international papers. Sometimes, with smaller fish, the incidents didn't even catch the attention of the media. Moreover, in a number of ransom cases, the victim's family and friends often kept the matter intentionally secret and away from the authorities and press. They would rather take their chances dealing directly with the bad guys than the government authorities. That was because those players were sometimes one and the same.

Sometimes we Americans didn't need to look abroad or under our bed for the scary bogeymen.

Jersey got up from his desk and started pacing his office. This was a standard routine when he was trying to spin something or to outright lie. He probably thought that the walking and talking bit was a more persuasive communication method with his audience of one. However, I'd seen him do this little ritual on more than one occasion for other, more gullible people. It was one more indication that he was trying to scam me.

Jersey paused to sip his coffee and then continued his story. Fortunately, he didn't spill any brew on his heavily-starched shirt. It probably would have gone unnoticed since starched and stuffed shirts were a common sight in the building. But Beth, his second

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wife, would have surely blamed me for her husband's clumsiness. We didn't get along since I occasionally pulled childish pranks on her husband.

"The ambassador's daughter would have been sitting in the backseat of the car, if she had followed normal practice. From sketchy eyewitness reports, we have been able to piece together that her vehicle was intercepted at a narrow cross-section of road about a mile from the school. It was the perfect chokepoint for a grab. Her car was cut-off by a tanker truck that pulled in front of it. The chauffeur probably didn't have enough room to perform a bootleg or J-turn maneuver to escape; even if he knew how to execute one in the first place."

"Three bad guys popped open the front passenger door with a jaws-of-life rig. The GPS device secreted in the vehicle activated and alerted the embassy security office, but by the time the cops arrived at the scene, it was much too late; the embassy driver and the ambassador's daughter had been kidnapped. The entire operation took about four minutes which indicated that these guys were damned good. As best we can tell, there were no amateurs involved in this grab-and-run operation, other than the chauffeur."

I let Jersey ramble on since I was interested in seeing how far he could push my envelope before I could no longer remain stationary. I didn't doubt the fact that the ambassador's daughter had been kidnapped—CNN had already carried the story during its early morning news shows. What had me wondering was the fine print of the story that Jersey wasn't disclosing.

As DS's Director of Investigations, he was the man on the spot to make things better. Ideally, making them better meant recovering the ambassador's daughter, alive and in good health. Making things second better meant finding a credible scapegoat to lay things off on if the investigation didn't go well. I had been in

his spot for several years before retiring and knew how hot the seat he was occupying could get. I also clearly understood my new role in this drama.

“Jersey, why do I sense I’m not getting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth from you?” I pointedly asked.

“It’s the old need-to-know principle at play, Avery,” he responded. “You know the rules: you don’t get any more information than necessary to do your job. You’ll be further briefed on the case and what’s expected of you when you get to post. Until then, that’s all the information you’re getting from HQ. You either go with the flow or you don’t go at all.”

“But why choose me?” I plaintively whined. “There are several experienced agents at post who can certainly do the job. In fact, they’d probably do a better job since they’re already familiar with the local scene and circumstances.”

“Avery, that’s precisely the problem. They’re too damn close to the situation. They are likely to be called before the department’s Accountability Review Board, if one is convened. We need someone who’s not connected with the case in any way, shape, or form. We have to use the ‘odd man out’ strategy on this one.”

“We need to send someone we can depend on, someone who won’t spin the facts and circumstances of the incident and someone who already has a valid multiple-entry visa for India. You’re definitely the oddest person I could think of so that’s why you’re here.”

I told him to go screw himself, if he could find his ass with either hand. I mentioned that if he needed any help, he could call in his stud bitch admin assistant to give a firm shove. I noticed that it was the first time Jersey had laughed during our meeting. He

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must have had some anal retentive hope that things would turn out okay for him in the end.

“So what’s my role in all of this?” I asked. “Playing the teat on the bull or perhaps something more practical that I can actually milk for a change?” I uttered, thinking I might have cowed him with my clever bons mots. I couldn’t help the puns and wordplay because real actions and decisions might have unintended consequences. Those could be career limiting or deadly if you weren’t careful, I remembered from my early career. Regardless, Jersey deftly sidestepped my childish nonsense.

“You will serve as the principal liaison officer between the local authorities and the embassy. As such, your role will be to coordinate the flow of investigative information back and forth between our government and the Indian authorities. The bottom line, you will be the point man for the U.S. government in the investigation of this incident. However, you will not, under any circumstances, put on your gumshoes and beat the bushes or the pavement for the bad guys. You will not play the hero in this drama; no Lone Ranger stuff this time. Do you hear me Avery?”

Jersey was getting red in the face. It was obvious that his blood pressure was peaking. Maybe I could push him over the edge and stroke-him out. Sometimes collegiality was a fickle and feckless thing among those who served and protected.

“Loud and clear, boss man. Yes sir, ten-four and five by five,” I replied by the numbers.

Jersey sat down and was quiet. He looked emotionally drained and probably felt like shit on a shoe.

I thought about what Jersey had mentioned earlier. The old need-to-know principle for Christ’s sake! I knew the principle by heart. I had been repeatedly kneed trying to know things during

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my DS career. My groin was so swollen that my cup had runneth over, I silently groaned.

Ok, I would go with what he gave me, but I didn't like it. I knew there was more to the story than what Jersey was telling me. I'd have to uncover the facts the old-fashioned way by doing solid detective work.

Yeah, right. Instead, I would work the old boy and girl network for more information and some answers. The department grapevine was a good source of juicy gossip and I would tap into it. I just needed to squeeze the rest out of Mother State since she had always quenched my thirst for scuttlebutt in the past.

The meeting was over. Jersey knew what he wanted me to do, and I knew what I was going to do. We both knew they weren't the same thing.

Chapter 2

High Noon for the Long Knives

Jimbo Rainwater was a full-blooded Sioux and a senior intelligence analyst assigned to DS's Threat Intelligence Division. Despite being from the most litigious Indian tribe in American history, he was also a first-rate research analyst who invariably got things right.

Listening to the department drums was a favorite pastime for him and he could pick up on their rhythms and cadences like no one else. He had the ear to discern the most subtle nuances of the drum beats and decipher their meanings. We had worked together off-and-on for years and had become friends; at least as much as possible in the department. "What do you mean 'we' white man?"

Sometimes friendship was only skin-deep for those who served and protected.

I joked a bit with Jimbo and then got down to business.

"Jimbo, what are the drums saying about the Delhi kidnapping?"

He smirked and immediately shot back that it wasn't kosher. I thanked him for his slice of Hebrew baloney. He had a wry sense of humor for a Gentile Indian and I tried asking again.

"Okay, what do you hear, wiseass?"

Jimbo immediately fell into his standard routine for such occasions by doing his Soaring Eagle shtick, as he liked to call it. He dropped to his knees and then put his ear to the floor, listening intently for the linoleum to reveal its wisdom.

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“I hear buffalo, kemosabe, many angry buffalo. It sounds like a large herd thundering through the hallways of Main State. Do not stand in its path or you will surely perish,” he spoke in flawless, Native American English. “I hear more, my pale-faced friend. I hear the Big Chiefs are extremely upset; on the warpath as my red brethren might have said without reservations. However, no one can figure out why. They’ve gotten past last week’s diplomatic snafu over the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, so go figure. The ambassador’s daughter is not a big deal in the overall scheme of things, but the seventh floor is really uptight and nervous over the incident. The reaction’s way out of proportion to the incident in my humble, Injun opinion.”

He then stood up, raised his right arm, and loudly said “How.”

As a Washingtonian, I enjoyed the Redskin’s home games so I asked, “How what, you frigging moron?”

“How do you think I learned that bit of gossip?” he responded.

“I have no clue so tell me O Wise One of the Endless Prairie,” I plainly asked.

“It was easy, my friend. I spoke with Andy Grafton, the shift-leader of the Secretary’s Detail earlier this morning. He filled me in on what was happening under the big-top teepee. The take away message is that the clowns and natives are restless.”

Jimbo’s opinions and sources were always good enough for me. What had the building so damn riled up? I wondered. I had no clue and neither did Jimbo. He said that a number of senior DS powers came into the building in the wee hours to powwow about the problem. I played his game of cowboys and Indians and asked how he knew that bit of trivia.

“Ugh, I checked the keycard access records when I arrived to see who else was in the building. I was curious and, as an anal

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retentive intelligence officer, I ran a report of the entry logs. That's how. It's an old Injun trick like hobbling our horses so they don't run off at night. Keep that bit of folklore under your war bonnet, white man. May the spirits of the soaring eagles peck-out both of my eyes if I'm lying to you, my friend."

I told him not to worry since he was already a bona fide pecker-head in my book.

"Okay, who done it, my brave chief? What are your counterparts in the intelligence community saying about the likely culprits?"

"They have already rounded up the usual suspects on paper; al-Qaida, the Tamil Tigers, Sikh separatists, common criminals, the Pope, who knows? They certainly don't. The list is endless, meaning they don't have a clue. It's a sad comment, but the community lost its edge years ago when they went for the high-tech, flash-bang, intelligence acquisition crap rather than employing the old-fashioned HUMINT techniques: the human spies."

"With the Soviets becoming good capitalists, the justification and interest for human intelligence sources dried up. Nobody cared about such outdated, antiquated methods of intelligence collection since it was much too low-brow for the TECHNO-MENSA crowd in the community."

Jimbo had gotten serious and I could tell he was on a personal vision quest because his eyes rolled up and he spoke in the disembodied voices of his ancestors. The sun-catcher hanging from his desk lamp looked like it was about to vibrate. This was going to be important stuff and I listened closely to what he had to say.

"It's now about plucking data from the ether, even though we have trouble digesting what we've collected. The trained linguists

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and analysts deciphering what we learn through these fancy methodologies either don't exist or are in short supply. However, accurate interpretation is the tough part."

"All the data collected is largely worthless if you can't determine the intentions of the bad guys. And you can't discern those things without having a real, live person inside a terrorist organization to give the stuff context and perspective—a reality check. We're now paying the price for ignoring tried-and-true intelligence collection methods and sources and shame on us! Thank God we retained our half-vast counterintelligence skills," he snickered while still entranced.

"Avery, spying has been called the world's second-oldest profession for good reason. We didn't have satellite imagery and communications intercepts for much of our history. We can thank the technocrats for leading us astray and leaving us vulnerable. Why? Because human spies don't make for high-dollar procurement awards to the private sector contractors; what President Dwight Eisenhower called the Military-Industrial Complex."

"The President was right as far as he went, but now the private intelligence and security service providers should be added to the mix to make the term more accurate. We should have renamed the thing as the Military-Industrial-Intelligence-Security Complex. Christ, the Pentagon wonks would love to come up with an acronym for that one."

"Avery, here's another point you need to know about these terrorists, especially the fundamentalists and extremists. They can't be easily bribed. You know that's how much of the human intelligence was gained in the past, especially during the Cold War. 'Money talked and bullshit walked' as we said then. By and

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large, that simply doesn't work today since we're dealing with religious idealists, zealots and not greedy apparatchiks".

Jimbo was now profusely sweating and breathing heavily. I worried that he might have a heart attack if he pushed his out-of-body experience too far, but I didn't interrupt him.

"We have a complex all right, but it's not a good one in my opinion. The government has outsourced many intelligence and security functions to the private sector. The jury's still out whether that's a good or bad thing for our nation."

I acknowledged that much of what Jimbo said rang true. We had been asleep at the switch for years when it came to accurately predicting, disrupting, and thwarting terrorist events around the world with 9/11 just one example. We sometimes picked the low-hanging fruit, but often missed the forest for the trees. I wasn't sure we were now much safer as a nation without matches aboard our aircraft and having a color chart of terrorist threat alerts to remind us we had a serious problem. Why did it seem that our leaders were colorblind and in the dark about such things? Were they afraid the American public might question our nation's foreign affairs policies around the world? What led us to this point in our country's history? How did we alienate much of the moderate Muslim population around the world?

Oh my God, I was on a vision quest too!

In my mind, secrecy cut both ways by hiding failures and screw-ups. I'd rather rely on a sleeping pill and a glass of Zinfandel for a good night's rest. That was just me and I tended to wax cynically and sarcastically. I readily acknowledged that my sage insights into the world's problems grew after each glass of wine.

Jimbo awakened from his dreamlike state and changed horses in the middle of the stream. That wasn't a safe thing to do unless

you were a confident Native American. “The department touts and wags are already betting that a board of inquiry will be convened over this one. Of course, they’re once again putting their carts before their horses. I guess that’s an old White-man trick, my brother, so their horses don’t run off in the middle of the night. Regardless, that’s pretty much the SOP around here. By the way, what’s new with you Avery? I haven’t seen you around the reservation in quite a while. From what I hear, you’ve been taking double-doses of Viagra for Mr. ED. The rumor mill has it you’ve now got a big hard-on for money these days and that’s the reason you’re returning to the DS clan with your tail tucked between your legs.”

“I was in Afghanistan for a few months and I’ve been nursing my psychic wounds at home since. Just the usual stuff,” I replied. I was actually being sincere for a change.

It was the same old, same old, routine since I returned to the States. I was bored out of my mind and welcomed the assignment for a change of pace and some sanity. I knew it was probably a no-win situation for me, but I didn’t care since I needed the money. You couldn’t spend job satisfaction or ego rewards these days because there were no company stores left to accept your chits.

I bade Jimbo a fond farewell and moved on to other parts of DS headquarters. We didn’t say goodbye when something more pompous or frivolous would suffice. It was simply the Foreign Service way of saying and doing things in a silly and pretentious manner.

Jimbo told me to leave a little wampum in the bowl by the door on my way out. I replied I would say howdy partner to his distant relatives in Delhi. In turn, he warned me not to get scalped by the natives when buying the god-awful airport art. The banal banter never ended among friends since it was always about one-

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upping the other. Amerindian humor really was universally funny, I thought, especially so for foreigners like the Sioux.

Sometimes those who served and protected swallowed their Redskins with a grain of salt; the peanut and potato varieties, certainly not the Native American intelligence types.

I caught Sherry Dumas in her office. That was unusual since she was often hanging out at the building's front entrance smoking and joking with her coworkers. She was a longtime smoker whose voice reflected her favorite vice. Husky was a nice word for her condition. No, she didn't resemble a participant in Alaska's Iditarod sled race. She just had a low, raspy voice from the many years of puffing and sucking on unfiltered cigarettes. If she bummed a filtered one, she'd tear its head off before lighting it. She showed no mercy whatsoever.

I had known Sherry well, becoming smoking buddies over the many long years we worked for the Diplomatic Security Service.

We had dragged on many a cigarette, joke, and piece of gossip during that time. She vowed to retire every other week out of sheer frustration with the organization, but never made good on her threats. Although she just might, if she couldn't control her chronic emphysema. Like me, she was a diehard, dyed-in-the-wool smoker and the habit didn't get any worse than that while you were still breathing.

"Big bangs are to be welcomed and enjoyed. In counterpoint, the Foreign Service whimpers are merely impotent celestial implosions of no measurable magnitude or consequence."

This inane and childish nonsense brought us together in addition to the smoking. I invited Sherry to the front entrance for a smoke. Of course, she readily agreed. Sherry was the ultimate DS insider. She was, or had been, the secretary (now called

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administrative assistant in our PC word-speak) to the current DS director, along with his five predecessors. She not only knew where the bodies were buried, but knew who buried them and when. She even shoveled some dirt over a couple of the corpses herself.

Sherry also had another special insight into the workings of the department. Her sister Liz worked for many years in the Executive Secretariat on the seventh floor of Main State. (Ok, it was more properly called the Harry S. Truman Building, but that happened in 2000 after I retired, so it didn't matter.) Between the two of them, they knew more about what was going on in the place than a dozen senior executives combined. They also had great memories and twisted senses of humor.

I lit her cigarette and then mine. I was first, and foremost, a gentleman when I tried to scam information. I inhaled deeply and enjoyed the flavor and I suspected she did the same. With the formalities over, I asked her the big question.

"Sherry, what the hell is going on with the seventh floor? The players all seem to be bouncing more than usual over the Delhi kidnapping. I can't make any sense of it. It seems way over the top considering such things. I even heard the Secretary is jumpy."

"Dick, it's strange. Liz and I don't understand what's happening. It's certainly a serious situation, but it's preoccupying the seniors much more than it should. Ambassador Thurman is a respected career ambassador who has a lot of admirers and clout on the Hill. Maybe that's why everyone is running around like Chicken Little with his head cut off."

"I'm not certain what is up because I've never seen this sort of reaction before. The seventh floor is almost in a full-warp speed, panic mode. I do know the Secretary and his direct reports are putting a lot of effort into resolving the matter. They seem to be

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pulling out all of the diplomatic stops to find the ambassador's daughter. In fact, it's the number one priority in the building at the moment."

"Have you heard anything about the Secretary convening an inquisition, I mean an ARB?" I asked.

I had a selfish motive for this question. If a formal ARB were called, I would definitely get sucked into it at some point. Anyone and everyone who had any involvement, no matter how tangentially, was fair game to testify as to what they knew and when they knew it.

"Nothing firm," she answered, "but the speculation suggests he'll convene one. There isn't much choice or wiggle room given the circumstances. There was a serious failure, a screw-up if you like, and someone or more than one has to pay the price. Heads must roll as decreed by the emperor of the seventh floor, but you can bet it won't be his. In any case, it's not going to be a pretty sight. Keep your head lowered and bowed, Avery, to avoid the axe-man that cometh."

I wasn't particularly worried about that happening since I kept mine firmly up my ass most of the time. It was the best way for someone to maintain peace of mind in the department. My guess was the Secretary would eventually call for an ARB to be convened to look into the circumstances of the kidnapping since he really had little choice these days. The law that underpinned the ARB would force his hand when there was serious personal injury or loss of life or substantial destruction of U.S. government property resulting from a security-related incident abroad. As usual, the law excluded U.S. military personnel and facilities located abroad under the authority of a U.S. commander.

The ARB had some teeth and accountability features. In several ways, it functioned much like a military tribunal and a

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formal administrative hearing—combined. It could compel witnesses to testify under oath and issue subpoenas under narrow circumstances. The building was betting the Secretary would act affirmatively and soon in order to deflect any criticism of the department and White House. Regardless, the Secretary could call an inquiry anything he wanted so long as it didn't draw unfavorable attention to the administration's credibility. That was a golden rule in Washington because you didn't kill the goose that laid your golden eggs or signed your biweekly paychecks.

There certainly were a lot of smoke signals, as Jimbo might say, but little fire. I needed to get a clearer picture of what was going on, but it seemed that I would have to wait to get the true skinny when I got to Delhi.

Sometimes those who served and protected couldn't make sense of things with all the smoke being blown up their asses.

Chapter 3

Indian Summer, Before the Fall

The Continental flight from Newark to Delhi was a non-stop, 14-hour and 32-minute journey—more or less. That was a long time for a heavy smoker to survive such a torturous ordeal, especially considering the more or less. I flew business class as proper and customary under the circumstances. By the way, all DS agents had business class since it was a prerequisite for hiring. However, diplomatic acumen and surefootedness were more difficult to come by for those of us cursed with flat feet.

I checked into the Radisson Hotel near the airport, but I'd find more permanent accommodations in the morning, closer to the embassy. The desk clerk must have remembered me from my earlier visit when I had transited Delhi for Afghanistan. The clerk immediately turned his back on me.

I didn't know what I might've said or done to offend him during my previous visit. I was pretty well-behaved before. After all, I didn't steal the linens. There were no suggestions of paternity suits being filed against me. I wasn't overly aggressive or obnoxious and/or drunk during my stay; but most importantly, I hadn't been publicly incontinent on the subcontinent. So what could it be, I wondered?

I had asked the hotel doorman where I could find a good deli; either in the old or new city. Maybe he didn't fully appreciate my quick-witted pun or nitwitted attitude, but so what. We all recognized that the funny bone was in the eye of the beholder. No

matter, I paid my bill and headed to the embassy with my battered suitcase and feelings.

Bob Gelati was the embassy's senior Regional Security Officer, or RSO, who came from a long line of DS agents. His great grandfather was the first Chief Special Agent of the Office of Security, the precursor to the Diplomatic Security Service. His father had also retired some years earlier from the security biz and passed the family banner to Bob. He carried it proudly as the Big Bird, his DS nom de plume. Under strict government naming rules, a nom de guerre was only assigned to those people working for the Pentagon with the State Department typically getting the discarded tail feathers.

Bob, the birdman, physically resembled a bowling pin with a huge, hooked schnozzle in the middle of his face. It looked as though it had been broken at some point and poorly set. It was a pronounced, bent proboscis. Of course, there was a story behind his misaligned nose. For several years, Bob was the organization's preeminent prankster. His favorite gag involved surreptitiously slipping condoms into the jacket pockets of his office colleagues.

On occasion, Bob's Coney Island Whitefish would be discovered by the agent's spouse, a girlfriend, a mother, or child. One of his coworker's wives was thoroughly embarrassed and outraged when the drycleaner returned a Trojan in a clear plastic bag attached to the family's freshly cleaned clothes. The woman's husband finally put an end to Bob's fun over that incident. The irate agent confronted him and demanded an apology, one to be conveyed directly to his spouse. Bob mistakenly declined to do so and laughed at the notion of apologizing. Moreover, he told the husband that he was damn lucky it wasn't a used one. It was then wham, bam, and thank you ma'am for Bob and his nose. The

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punch not only broke Bob's nose, but also his penchant for pulling pranks—for good.

Sometimes those who served and protected were too damn nosy and nervy for their own good.

There were other quirks to deal with in the outfit as well. Handles, monikers and nicknames were big deals in DS. Good, bad or indifferent, the tags tended to stick with you throughout your career. They even followed you into retirement as I could attest. Mine was an obvious choice given my name. I didn't need to give you a heads-up to figure it out.

The Big Bird introduced his staff and, not surprisingly, most of the agents and administrative assistants were male. However, Constance McAlister was one of four assistant RSOs; the exception to the rule. She had been at post for about eighteen months, just about midpoint in her tour. Constance became Connie to her friends, but to her embassy colleagues, both admirers and detractors, her tag name was Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction and dissolution.

Part of her nickname derived from the fact that she was a tough lady who was born and raised on the near South side of Chicago. Constance, Connie, or Kali brooked no nonsense from her male counterparts in the office. She was professional, competent and could tear your balls off and feed them to you if you deserved it and within arms' reach at the time. She was very attractive physically, but considered by her male coworkers to be a bit butch in her dress and demeanor. That was simply DS code-talk meaning she refused to put out for any of them.

Regardless, the Big Bird had something very nice to say about Connie; she was being assigned to assist me. As the Bird made his announcement, my mind wandered. I pondered the essence of the duality of the Hindu deities. I found the concept fascinating since

it was also a well-entrenched department trait, along with the concept of duplicity. Unlike other religions, Hindu devotees were getting their money's worth out of their gods. Most seemed to be two-fers—good and evil, sun and moon, male and female, yin and yang, black and white, day and night, Heckle and Jeckle; each persona representing opposites existing in one supreme being. Talk about tense, internal relationships.

In Kali's case, she was the goddess of destruction and, by implication, death. With four arms, a coal-black face, and a protruding red tongue, she possessed an imposing and fearsome visage indeed. In her bipolar mode, she was a strong feminine force who was looked upon as a divine mother and protector. She represented the hope of salvation for all human beings.

She whets our spiritual appetites in this respect. I didn't care if she salivated while saving souls, I explosively spoke while the very words drooled down my chin. Salivation was always nigh the faces of those who served and protected if they were worth their own spit.

Connie had never been married, but my bet was she had been pursued over the years by many a guy. She earned her law degree at the University of Chicago and went on to become a street cop for the city for several years before joining DS as a special agent. Lastly, she was African American. Connie's countenance was as black as the deepest, darkest hole in old Calcutta and her skin tone perfectly matched that of her namesake, Kali. Thank God she didn't have four arms, although that actually might be interesting, I mentally noted as an embracing thought. Regardless, I instantly liked her and looked forward to working with her. I naturally gravitated toward the black sheep of the organizational flock. I was a kindred spirit regardless of my wrinkled, lily-white skin. I

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couldn't even get a decent tan when I tried and I was always white with envy.

When I had a chance, I pulled Connie aside to talk privately. I broke the ice by telling her that some of my best friends back home were of Negro, colored persuasion. I didn't use the term African American out of respect for her Chicago heritage. The two were continents apart and geographically separable. She'd always be a Chicago-American woman in my book. I was glad that I cleared the air with her before we got off on the wrong foot.

"I'm of one hundred percent, pure African blood," she laughingly said at my stupid comments. "Apparently, no light-skinned bwanas got into my ancestors loincloths. For the record, I'm also one hundred percent Chicagoan at heart," she quickly added. Kali had a clever sense of humor and wit; rare traits among her coworkers who were witless most of the time. Being clueless was another of their strong points.

"I'm a one hundred percent, male-chauvinist WASP," I replied. "In any case, I'm glad we are working together on the case. I need someone who can point me in the right direction and keep me more-or-less on track. By the way, your DS corridor rep is first-rate and I've heard nothing but good things about you. Do you mind if I call you Kali? That seems to be your tag for better or worse."

"Kali's okay. I don't mind, in fact, since I've gotten used to it. On the other hand, Avery, your corridor rep is less than inspiring. Word on the street has it that you're a loner who's unconventional, to put it politely," she added. "Quirky is the kindest reference I've heard anyone say about you," she continued. "You seem to be a risk-taker and a legend in your own mind. However, you do have a certain knack for getting the job done in your own bumbling, unconventional style. I guess that's why DS brought you out of

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retirement. That coupled with the fact no other agent would willingly take the assignment. By the way, your name is your tag. Do you mind if I call you Avery rather than Dick or something worse?"

I really enjoyed the freewheeling give-and-take of our verbal exchange and her earthy sense of humor. Kali wasn't the slightest bit defensive regarding her skin color or the fact she was from the Midwest or that she was a woman. Being a DS agent didn't seem to be an issue with her either. These were good indicators that her self-esteem was high; an important attribute in our highly esteemed biz. We'd get along fine.

Chapter 4

Brainstorming Without Butting Heads

Our meeting with Ambassador Matthew Thurman was held in the chancery's Bubble on the top floor of the building. The Bubble was a secure meeting room where the most sensitive conversations could be held. It was also the perfect place for the department's regional psychiatrist to meet with his or her patients. The embassy's Marine security guards found it useful for late night trysts with their girlfriends or boyfriends. Foreign Service couples would occasionally reserve the room to openly vent their hostilities without their kids or neighbors overhearing. In its true essence, it was a multipurpose, high-tech room designed for ultimate, aural privacy. And it was a state-of-the-art security measure based on Yankee ingenuity and enterprise. The latest, lowest-bidder technology was evident in its elegant design and construction.

The Bubble was constructed in a manner to defeat clandestine listening devices of all manner and stripe from parabolic microphones, bugs, hard-wired pin-hole microphones and drop transmitters to the finest crystal goblets being held against its outer walls. It had no windows and was sparsely furnished to facilitate inspection for the presence of covertly planted audio devices. Officers' iPods and cell phones were routinely confiscated during meetings and the room was regularly swept to clear away the many empty Starbucks' cups and Dunkin' Donut wrappers.

For national security reasons, only security-cleared Americans and their sanitized food products could enter the room. The

cavities of the walls, ceiling, and floor were filled with Silly Putty in order to dramatically lower the Bubble's acoustical signature. That feature also helped with the irate and angry embassy staffers who tended to bounce off its walls. Moreover, the floor outside was strewn with Styrofoam packing peanuts to alert of approaching persons; thus serving as a low cost, but effective security alarm in a crunch.

Its interior surfaces were lined with multiple sheets of overlapping bubble wrap; hence its name. The ambassador always had to admonish attendees not to pop the bubbles. The regional shrink was the worst offender since he or she usually was the first to snap. The act was considered not only neurotic, but self-defeating as well. The room's conference table could comfortably seat up to eight people if they were all severely anorexic, intimate friends. In summary, it was the perfect place for off-line, off-color, and scandalous gossip among the embassy's elite.

This was our venue for discussing the kidnapping, and developing a plan of action to recover the ambassador's daughter. Maybe I'd finally be able to hear myself thinking, I thought. That could be a scary experience.

I was introduced to ambassador Thurman; the CIA's chief-of-station, Amy Wiley; the ambassador's executive assistant, Todd Jensen; and the USIS public affairs officer, Ronald Smithers. Bob Gelati and Kali McAlister were also present. I mouthed my sincere regrets and condolences and quickly got past that bit of protocol. I outlined my portfolio as the liaison officer and coordinator of the investigation. I emphasized that our goal was to facilitate the safe return of the ambassador's daughter and the embassy chauffeur. It was an obvious, self-serving statement, but still needed to be said up-front.

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No one questioned my role or marching orders from Washington. That was a refreshing change from other receptions I'd received from post management over the years. In those instances, I was often treated like a leper seeking shelter from the plague.

The ambassador instructed Bob to summarize the incident and give a status report on the investigation. Bob began at the beginning which was a good place to start. However, we're all good at starting from square-one in DS. But we typically had trouble finding and filling in the blanks or following the numbers later on.

"Avery, you already have the broad outline of the kidnapping. Let me recap what we know so far to bring you up to speed. Alicia Thurman was being driven to the International School of Delhi this past Wednesday by Singh Joginder Singh, an embassy driver in good standing, at least until now. The school is about four miles from the ambassador's residence. Keep in mind that traffic is always crazy here. It's congested, slow, bumper-to-bumper, and cheek-by-jowl for the most part. In other words, it's the normal, chaotic Delhi commute during rush-hour. At a tight intersection, about a mile from the school, was where they took her down. The front passenger door was pried open and Alicia and Singh were physically removed at gunpoint."

As Bob took a breather, I asked a question. "Have the bad guys made any contact with the embassy?"

Bob looked directly at the ambassador. The ambassador nodded his head and Bob now had permission to tell me something more.

"Yes, we received a small package last night at the chancery. There was a note inside addressed to the ambassador and the U.S.

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government,” he revealed. “The note said that United States troops must immediately leave Afghanistan, or else.”

He then reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a plastic bag filled with what appeared to be ice chips. He gently pushed the ice around the bag to reveal a piece of skin. It was a fingertip with the nail still intact. Bob announced the fingertip belonged to Singh. His fingerprints were on file with the embassy; taken years ago as part of the routine employment process. It was an easy, confirmed match. I asked Bob if he had checked the note for fingerprints. He looked a little bit offended by my question.

“Sure, we dusted it for prints and there were a lot. However, each one was the right, middle fingertip belonging to Singh; the one here,” he said, holding up the bag.

I sat back in my chair and pondered the possible meanings and significances of this most disgusting gift. Somebody was giving the middle finger to Uncle Sam. That was the obvious answer. The symbolism was just too strong to be otherwise. It was a rude but most Americanized gesture. But I kept that bit of intelligence to myself for safekeeping. I believed my application of Occam’s logic was razor sharp in this instance.

However, Bob had his own interpretation. “This is a not-so-subtle message that we’re dealing with very serious players who are ruthless and will go to great lengths to get what they want. What they want is for America to pack its bags and get out of Afghanistan, soonest. If we don’t acquiesce to their demand, there may be other body parts coming our way. The next piece may be female. Sorry, Mr. Ambassador, but that’s the clear implication in my opinion.”

Amy Wiley spoke for the first time. “We can rule out the Tamil Tigers and the Sikh Separatists on several levels. This was also too sophisticated an operation for a common criminal gang,

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no matter how talented and organized. That, and the fact no money has been demanded so far. With the political nature of the demand, I suspect al-Qaida and/or the Taliban are behind the kidnapping. If that's so, we're in for a tough time."

I still felt that they were holding back information from me. Why, I didn't know, but my antennae were twitching. That was always a good indicator that someone, just like Jersey Briggs, wasn't telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help them God or Lord Shiva. I frankly didn't care which one. I then firmly braced the ambassador with the question.

"What aren't you telling me, Mr. Ambassador? I've been doing these sorts of things for a lot of years and I have a sixth-sense that you're all holding out on me and I don't appreciate that. It's also not a safe way to operate. If I'm to be part of the embassy team and do my job, I need to know what else there might be. I have a bona fide need-to-know at this point to use that timeworn, bureaucratic expression."

The ambassador glanced around the room to read the expressions on everyone's faces. Then he spoke. I knew he was a good poker player because I couldn't see much disclosure.

"Avery, I love my daughter. My wife is half-out of her mind with worry and has been on a nonstop diet of Xanax since this happened and I'm not in much better shape. I'm emotionally torn between my duties and obligations as a diplomat and as a father."

I felt sorry for the guy. He wasn't a department Black Dragon; a smug, self-promoting careerist. That fact alone put him high in my book. I wasn't sure that I could keep it together so well under similar circumstances.

"Avery, you're right. There is more," he continued. "The other shoe is now being dropped in this room and it's a heavy one. I trust you will maintain its confidentiality. In fact, I know you will

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once you hear it. It's something that has been a closely held secret. The Indian government's not aware of it and only a handful of people in Washington and at post are privy."

I looked about the room and noticed that the others squirmed a bit in their chairs while the ambassador spoke. They were nervous and showing it. I straightened up in my own and stared directly at him.

"There was a security guard who was killed during the attack. He was killed execution style by one shot to his chest. But the shot wasn't fatal according to the coroner and it only incapacitated him. He was also garroted to death with what appears to be a piece of razor wire. That gruesome act almost cut his neck in half and he didn't have a chance. It seemed to be an almost ritualistic coup de grace. It was certainly unnecessary overkill; no pun intended. He died before he could fully get his gun out of his holster to return fire. Fortunately, the news media isn't aware of that bit of information——"

"And that's the way we want to keep it for now," interrupted the public affairs officer.

"That's right Ronald, but please stay quiet for a moment and let me finish," the ambassador admonished.

"The guard was a security escort assigned to protect my daughter's friend." He started looking around the room again, but continued telling the story.

"He was one of two agents with the Afghan Presidential Protection Force assigned to a very important person. But I'm not referring to my daughter who's very special to me and my wife. I'm referring to Zeenat Karzai, the eldest daughter of Hamid Karzai, the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan."

He sat back in his chair waiting for me to digest what I'd just heard. I was now dead certain that the Secretary would order an

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Accountability Review Board since he really had no choice. Someone had been murdered and someone had to be held accountable. An inquisition would go forward and I'd end up having to testify to my role in the incident. Even after-the-fact actions were subject to close scrutiny these days.

Good God! No wonder I didn't get the full story in Washington. This was bombshell information. Jersey was sworn to secrecy about the Karzai aspect of the incident. He knew I would ultimately get the straight skinny at post, but he couldn't say a word. That's why he was so uptight and scared. That's why the Secretary of State and the seventh floor suits were acting like a bunch of rats caught in a maze at feeding time. Hamid Karzai was an American success story so far and the administration's one bright light in an otherwise dark region. This was a BFD of major magnitude—to the power of ten and then some. Jesus, and I was right in the middle of things, thanks to my friend Jersey Briggs. Ok, I admit the money was a big motivator too.

Ambassador Thurman related that Zeenat Karzai had been discreetly and quietly living in the guesthouse on the compound of his residence for several months. President Karzai had approached our ambassador in Kabul and asked if the U.S. government could help with Zeenat's schooling. She had one year left to graduate from high school before attending university in the UK or the States. Attending school and finding appropriate education in Kabul were difficult at the best of times. Her personal safety was always uppermost in her father's mind. President Karzai had attended college in India some years before and thought the International School of Delhi would be a perfect fit for her.

The U.S. government was more than willing to help a close friend and ally and Zeenat was enrolled in the ISD under an assumed name. She was a good student and had become a close

friend of the ambassador's daughter. They were the same age and shared the same interests. Zeenat was very Western in her attitude, dress and demeanor, the ambassador mentioned. Like most teens, she enjoyed fashionable clothes and makeup, and flirting with the boys at school. She fit in well with her classmates and was well-regarded and popular.

No one had a clue as to her true identity since it supposedly was a very well-kept secret among the few people at post who knew. However, President Karzai insisted that she be accompanied by a trusted agent of the Afghan Presidential Protection Force anytime she left the compound or school. She had two minders who alternated in protecting her when she was out and about. One gave his life for her. The other was now unemployed and worrying about his future.

The ambassador said that the NIACT and IMMEDIATE precedence cables had been flying back and forth between the embassies in Kabul and Delhi and between the department in Washington and both posts. The White House had taken a keen interest in what was going on and it was putting pressure on the department to deliver, to make things right. In turn, the politicians and Black Dragons were squeezing DS for actions and answers. It was the trickle-down, crisis management scenario at its very best. Moreover, it was business as usual in such situations.

Ronald Smithers piped-up next. He said that the news media had bought-off on the story as portrayed by the embassy. The ambassador's daughter, along with her driver, had been kidnapped and a local security guard accompanying them had been killed during the incident. It was a tragic matter that needed to be quickly resolved so the captives could be returned to their families unharmed.

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There was no mention of Zeenat Karzai. She had quietly withdrawn from the ISD for health reasons, but would reenroll when she was feeling better or so the cover story went. President Karzai had demanded a complete black-out of Zeenat's involvement. No acknowledgment or reference to her could be made. President Karzai was already governing Afghanistan from a position of weakness and tried his best to oversee a fractious, dysfunctional nation that chafed at the notion of being subordinated to a strong central government. The incident would weaken his position even further if it became public knowledge.

Amy Wiley spoke next. "You can see why I mentioned earlier that the Sikhs and Tamils were no longer considered logical suspects. Al-Qaida is still a strong bet and, if so, my hunch is they outsourced the job to another group. Operationally, al-Qaida's simply not that strong in India to carry something like this off. I don't believe they have the resources and infrastructure to do it. However, that doesn't automatically count them out. I suspect they may have subcontracted the wet-work to some other organization with the means and methods to make it happen."

"We have translations of the communication intercepts surrounding the event if you wish to review them. These are mostly from the unencrypted radio calls among the Indian cops and security officials following the kidnapping. There was a lot of confusion and stepping on each other's tongues during the critical time-frame. But you might be able to tease something out of them that we may have missed."

I thanked her and said I would take her up on her offer later that day. My head was spinning with the new information I'd just been told. I needed to pee and have a cigarette or two to clear my body and mind.

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Sometimes those who served and protected had to move quickly to answer Mother Nature's call and the Devil's addiction.

Chapter 5

Gaming the Game Plan

Kali and I decided to put our heads together. It was the latest bonding fad in the department. She smelled sweet and sexy which made her a very appealing woman. If it weren't for the age issue, I would have hit on her very hard. I guessed she was somewhere in her mid-thirties. Unfortunately, I liked my women much younger. Maybe I could get past my personal bias and be less discriminatory toward her. As colleagues and investigative partners, I'd try my best.

Then again, maybe I could be her mentor, big brother, sugar daddy, or sex partner if she'd let me. I just hoped she wasn't hung up on the age-thing too. Sometimes younger women didn't like to acknowledge and act out their Electra impulses. That was a psychological condition I could easily understand and appreciate at my age. For what it was worth, I was always a big Buick fan.

We had been given the middle finger, but little else. It was a good tip as far as it went, but we needed much more information. The accompanying note provided no forensic leads whatsoever. In any event, we were being much too stationary and had to step up our investigation—fast. The first step was to get ourselves organized into a task force. For that, we would need private, secure office space. We also needed one of Big Bird's ace investigators to work with us. He graciously gave us an office on the second floor of the chancery and Ravi Patel.

Ravi Patel was the senior Foreign Service national or FSN on the RSO's staff. Three other Indian investigators rounded out the

numbers. The FSN investigators were worth their weight in gold, and then some. They typically had many years of experience as senior law enforcement, or intelligence, or security service agents with their government before they joined the embassy. And Ravi was no different. He had been a senior official in India's intelligence and security apparatus, the Central Intelligence Bureau, known simply as the IB. The IB was reputed to be the oldest intelligence agency in the world. I then wondered if India was home to the world's oldest profession too.

In other words, Ravi Patel was part of the Indian intelligentsia which made him a bright and clever asset for our team. His standing would also significantly help raise the team's overall IQ numbers. Organizationally, the IB sat in the Ministry of Home Affairs, but in practice, its director was a member of the nation's Joint Intelligence Committee and could directly report to the Prime Minister, if circumstances required. Historically, the IB was tasked with intelligence targeting, but it had shifted focus in recent times to internal security matters. Fighting terrorism, both external and internal, was now the number one concern of the organization.

Ravi had served in a number of positions throughout the country. He rose quickly through the ranks and was rumored to become one of its top leaders until he was seriously wounded in a gun battle with Sikh separatists. He took a disability retirement from the Indian government and signed on with the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi as an investigator.

Ravi rose quickly in the embassy hierarchy too and soon became the top dog of the investigator's kennel. Not only was he highly competent and dedicated, but he was also a superb investigator and hardwired into the GOI authorities. His wound in the line of duty, and resultant limp, earned him the nickname of Chester from the old TV series, *Gunsmoke*. Since his employment,

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he had risked his life and limb on more than one occasion for Uncle Sam—his Marshal Matt Dillion. He was a perfect addition to our mini-task force. From now on out, we would call him Chester too; a manly, Anglo-American name. Moreover, we would call him by his nickname to his face instead of behind his back.

However, we had a problem with Chester; most certainly not with him personally, but with his nationality. He was Indian, but not the Native American variety. In order to have access to all of the embassy intelligence, he needed to be a U.S. citizen with a security clearance. The rules were strict and we couldn't simply ignore them. We didn't want to be brought up on espionage or other related criminal charges; however, it was vitally important to cut Chester in on all of the sensitive information the embassy had collected. We required his insight and experience to guide us through the investigative process with the local authorities. We desperately needed some clues and a pinch of dumb luck too.

We decided to apply the government's own rules and regulations to grant him citizenship and clearance. We would have to greatly compress the processing time, but we'd always stay within the letter of the law. It was important for law enforcement types to set the example for others who didn't have the chutzpah or stones to break the law legally. I ran my idea by Kali and she agreed that expediency was called for under the circumstances. It was an unorthodox solution, but perfectly legal in my book. I just hoped they didn't throw it at me later because that wouldn't be a good chapter in my life.

We would be able to grant Chester both U.S. citizenship and an interim top-secret security clearance within two hours if we played our due-diligence cards properly. Chester reluctantly agreed to become an instant American out of overarching patriotic

zeal and a firm promise of continued employment with the embassy. He was already demonstrating those virtues and qualities that we looked for in our new citizens. That meant his principles could be easily compromised. God bless America!

The first step was to have Chester complete a non-immigrant visa form and submit it to the Consular Section on the first-floor of the chancery. That was the easy part. He already had a couple of photos and we attached them to his form. It stated the reason for his visit to the United States was for religious purposes. In other words, he wanted to see Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

This action was a no-brainer for the consular folks who stamped passports for Indians wanting the same thing day-in and day-out. It was routine and perfunctory, up to a point. Chester's twist was that he requested only single-day admittance to the States. That wasn't for the theme park, but rather the amount of time he could legally stay in the United States. One calendar day was the limit before he was in violation of U.S. law by overstaying his visa.

Chester dutifully signed the paperwork and it was witnessed by Kali. She took the completed package to the Consular Section and returned fifteen minutes later with Chester's Indian passport and a freshly stamped NIV. Since Chester was an employee of the U.S. government by virtue of his tenure with the embassy, his application was quickly granted. He was a known quantity, as they said. He was considered an outstanding candidate for return to India and clearly not a risk to overstay his visa.

I told Chester to leave the embassy and get a cup of tea down the street. He should return in about an hour and report to me. I had a couple of cigarettes while I waited. As instructed, Chester returned. I told him to sit down and not to worry, but I was placing him under arrest. I then put on my DS Special Agent hat,

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figuratively speaking, and formally introduced myself to him. I didn't bother to Mirandize him then, but would do so later to cover all the legal bases. I then demanded to see his passport. He was inside the chancery and now on sovereign U.S. soil. I wanted to confirm that he had a valid visa to be in the United States legally.

He looked at me strangely and produced his passport. I quickly scanned it and found what I was looking for. His one-day visa to the States had expired given the time difference between the two countries, overstaying his visa by at least 14 minutes by my count and was now in violation of at least two sections of Title 18, United States Criminal Code. Investigating passport and visa fraud violations was DS's stock-in-trade. These statutes served as the foundation for DS agents' status as federal law enforcement officers and criminal investigators. Obviously, Chester had been messing with the wrong people. I immediately placed him under arrest. He was a criminal in Uncle Sam's eyes. He didn't resist and went quietly. Kali served as witness to the whole sordid affair.

As I placed him under arrest, he blurted out that he couldn't go home again since he feared for his life. He then spoke the magic words we had rehearsed: "I demand political asylum in the United States of America."

Chester tearfully explained that it was impossible for him to return home. His wife would kill him when she found out he'd become a U.S. citizen without including her. He wouldn't stand a chance and he greatly feared for his personal safety and for his very life. It was a compelling and heartrending story that both Kali and I found totally plausible.

As required by the circumstances, we completed the paperwork that would grant him asylum in the United States. Kali hand-carried the paperwork to the Homeland Security Customs and Immigration officer assigned to the embassy. Based on her

sworn testimony, Chester was promptly granted asylum in the United States. He was a free man again, but not quite home.

The next step was to get Chester an immigrant visa for permanent residency and a green card to the States. We completed the paperwork in record time. In short order, Chester was granted immigrant status based on the petition we prepared on his behalf.

The next to last step in the process would be getting him citizenship and that exercise would be fairly simple. As a bona fide immigrant alien and a long-time employee of the U.S. government, he automatically jumped to the head of the line for citizenship by regulation and law. He was already well-versed in American history and culture so the immigration questions were a breeze for him to answer.

Who's buried in Grant's tomb? What was the color of George Washington's white horse? Do you believe the pyramid eye on the US dollar bill is Indian in origin and, if so, which tribe?

It was just the usual stuff for citizenship applications and the Foreign Service entrance exam. However, Kali and I prepped him on the correct answers. I had to Google one of the answers though. Granted, I thought the "Grant's tomb" question was a trick one, but I didn't want to take the obvious answer for granted. Chester passed the quiz with flying colors and I arranged for Ambassador Thurman to administer Chester's oath of citizenship. It was a moving one-minute ceremony and we moved right along to get him a security clearance.

I told Kali we needed to conduct a full-field background investigation; a Single Scope BI, in the parlance of the biz, for Chester in order to get him a top-secret security clearance from the department. She understood the drill and immediately went to work.

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While I interviewed Chester, she would interview his supervisor and coworkers, review his official personal folder and security file for any and all relevant information. She also would conduct the internal embassy record checks of the various federal agencies at post. Kali would conduct the neighborhood checks over the phone since her facility in Hindi and English was slightly better than mine. Chester completed the security questionnaire in my presence and I took two sets of his fingerprints. It was now down to the personal interview.

The PI, or personal interview, was probably the best investigative tool in the background investigative process.

The applicant must answer questions regarding his or her personal history. It could be a very stressful experience, especially for the interviewer. I started by asking him about his citizenship. Chester claimed that he was a dual-national and held both Indian and United States citizenship. When I asked if he could verify the claim, he handed me his Indian passport and a huge stack of paper consisting of his applications and petitions for his non-immigrant visa, political asylum/refugee status, permanent residency, and U.S. citizenship. His paperwork seemed to be in order and I was impressed with his wonderful penmanship. I asked the customary questions by keying on the answers on his security questionnaire. He answered the box marked sex correctly from what I could tell since there was no indication of foreign travel to Sweden. That was a good sign since we could no longer ask about the applicant's sexual orientation.

I was about finished with the interview when something caught my eye. Chester indicated on the questionnaire that he had been recently arrested for something and I asked him about the circumstances. He said some embassy jerk had coerced him into getting U.S. citizenship and a security clearance. I cut the

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interview short at that point and, as a fellow American, congratulated him on passing the interview with high honors.

Kali returned with all of her files and notes and gave me a thumbs-up sign. That meant she hadn't found anything in Chester's past that would disqualify him for a security clearance. I instructed her to fax Chester's questionnaire, his fingerprint charts, and our investigative report to DS's Evaluations Division at headquarters. They could churn out an interim top-secret clearance for Chester within 24 hours based on our reporting and the results of a favorable national agency check. That would be done via electronic submission of his fingerprints to the FBI's National Crime Information Center. I thought technology was great when it worked to my advantage.

By tomorrow, Chester would be a cleared American citizen who could legally have access to our government's most sensitive secrets. He could now be a Bubble boy with the rest of us. However, he would have to apply for a U.S. passport on his own time and dime. I adamantly refused to dirty my hands by facilitating passport fraud. After all, I did have certain principles to uphold as a DS special agent. I must be losing my touch, I thought. The whole enchilada, from beginning to end, took 2 hours and 25 minutes. In my younger days, I could crank such things out within 2 hours—tops.

Chapter 6

Stooping to Conquer

We needed to go back to the day of the event and reconstruct what happened on a moment-by-moment basis, if possible. I assigned Chester the task of hunting and gathering intelligence with the local authorities. Despite his new citizenship, they still spoke the same language and were of the same tribe. I told him to get with the cops and pull together all of the factual information and documentation he could without being thrown in jail. I wanted copies of all photographs and sketches of the crime scene; all witness reports, and all investigative materials that they had compiled to date. I wanted all forensic reports that had been completed. Secondly, I wanted Chester to put aside his logical investigative mind and ask his former colleagues for their theories and speculations as to which group might be behind the kidnapping. What were their possible motives and who were the possible players in this deadly docudrama.

I told him to jot down everything mentioned no matter how illogical or absurd or bizarre it might seem. I wanted to know what others were thinking. This was a tried and true investigative trick that called for serious, mindless thinking.

As an aside, Kali and I agreed not to brief Chester on the Karzai connection. We fully trusted him, but we were both interested in knowing if there was any gossip or scuttlebutt or good old-fashioned speculation about that aspect of the investigation. Chester would give us all the information he collected during his stop at the cop shop. We didn't want to

thoughtlessly preempt, prejudice or prompt him in his inquiries—just the facts, ma'am!

After Chester finished with the cops, I instructed him to go to the crime scene and mentally reconstruct the event. I told him to re-interview any and all witnesses. I told him to confirm that the authorities had collected all of the video recordings in the neighborhood from any street or storefront cameras. Maybe someone remembered something they didn't mention to the police or didn't want to tell them.

I asked Kali to work with the station and other embassy sources. She needed to review all of the communications intercepts on file. I also told her to pull intercepts for the week preceding the incident to see if there was anything of significance. I asked her to review any overhead imagery that might be available. It was a long shot because America's spy satellites were aimed at India's nuclear weapons and development facilities located elsewhere in the country. Commercial satellite photos might provide a possible lead, so I asked her to check that avenue as well. I only wanted the big-picture stuff at this stage of the investigation.

While Kali and Chester went about their assigned duties, I would focus on the principals at the center of this drama—Alicia Thurman, Zeenat Karzai, Singh Singh, and the two APPF agents. I needed some perspective and background on their personalities. Only one of them could be interviewed so I started with Kamal Barbak. I met with him in the embassy cafeteria and he bought the coffee and donuts, as customary under such circumstances. At least that was what I told him.

He was sullen, depressed and even a bit despondent and the language differences didn't help matters. It was a difficult interview from that perspective alone. Regardless, Kamal told me he had been handpicked by the Director of the Afghan Presidential

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Protection Force for the assignment to protect Zeenat. It was prestigious duty, an honor, and a feather in his professional cap.

He avowed that both he and his partner, Mohammed Shah, were selected for the plum job due to their loyalty to President Karzai. They were both Pashto tribesmen, kinsmen of the president. He acknowledged that this was an important consideration for his boss in choosing them. The APPF leadership was quite rightly concerned about the infiltration of Taliban or Mujahedeen fighters into their ranks. Kamal mentioned that they didn't want to unwittingly put any foxes in that henhouse. Obviously, Afghans were familiar with foxes and hens, but not quislings and fifth-columnists. It must be a cultural, geopolitical thing since quislings were not a formally recognized clan in Afghanistan.

Loyalty was the first and most important qualification for APPF candidates. And Kamal stated he passed the Afghan government litmus test with flying colors by claiming his turned true blue. That was because his uncle and the President were boyhood friends. His entire family would be at risk if the President or his tribesmen believed he had any responsibility for the incident. He was already in serious trouble with his bosses. They didn't take kindly to one of their own losing the beloved daughter of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Apparently, they had no sense of humor whatsoever in such matters. He said he was awaiting his fate and further instructions from Kabul. Moreover, he swore he had no knowledge or involvement in the kidnapping and that Mohammed didn't either; the thought was simply unthinkable. He was now facing humiliation or worse when he returned home.

I asked the perfunctory questions and Kamal provided the perfunctory answers. Did he or Mohammed observe anything

unusual in the days leading up to the kidnapping? Was there anything out of the ordinary in the daily routines of Zeenat or Alicia? Did he pick-up on any indications of surveillance? Was he aware of any threats directed toward them? Had there been any prior, minor incidents of an unusual nature?

Kamal responded with a shake of his head to each question. He said he couldn't think of anything useful or relevant along the lines of my queries. He commented that everything was routine, actually dull, during the three months that they had been guarding Zeenat. She rarely left the ambassador's compound other than to attend school at the ISD. She wasn't a troublesome, rambunctious teen or risk-taker who liked to push the envelope or her luck. He described her as being a bit shy and bookish most of the time. She understood she was the daughter of a head of state. More importantly, she was mindful of the duties and obligations as a daughter in the Islamic tradition and faith. She would never dishonor her father or her country.

I inquired about Alicia Thurman as well. Kamal said he didn't know her all that well. Most of his contact with her was in the car going to and from school. The two girls joked and giggled a lot in the backseat during the drive and that was about it.

I then asked him about Singh Joginder Singh. Kamal described the driver as quiet and reserved. He thought he was a good chauffeur, a careful one. There hadn't been a single, serious traffic accident or even a fender bender in the few months that he had been assigned to protect Zeenat. That alone was a significant accomplishment given the driving conditions in Delhi. He thought conditions in the city were even worse than in Kabul. I mentally and strongly disagreed with his assertion, but said nothing. Kamal said he didn't socialize with Singh so he really couldn't add much

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to his profile. Well, so much for victim profiling as a useful investigative tool.

I then asked Kamal about the times and routes they used for taking the girls to school. He said they were aware of the precautions to be taken to reduce their vulnerability. However, he added that the schedule was fairly predictable. They left the residential compound within a 15 minute window each morning. He said it was impossible to convince the ambassador's wife to send the girls to school much earlier or later in the day. They had to contend with their own class times and schedules at school. It was simply impractical to vary the departure times by more than a few minutes either way.

As to the routes, he said that Singh generally chose the routes. He and Mohammed both deferred to him for reasons of traffic congestion rather than security considerations. Singh would typically check with the other embassy drivers to find out where there were traffic snarls or snafus due to road construction or accidents or weather or whatever. Those things drove the route selection each morning more than anything else.

I specifically inquired about the week or so prior to the kidnapping. Which routes were taken by Singh? He replied they had taken the same route over many days due to road closures and traffic detours in the city according to Singh's intelligence reports. They made relatively good time to the school via the route chosen by Singh.

He said the main road they took was narrow and congested like most roads in the city. He mentioned the street people would congregate around the vehicle when it came to a stop. They'd press their faces against the windows to plead and cajole the passengers for money or whatever. The beggars would beg, the windshield washers would wash, and the newspaper hawkers

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would hawk. He said he didn't notice anything threatening or suspicious in the activities. It was just the normal, routine and controlled chaos swirling in a human sea in the capital.

I thanked Kamal and told him not to leave town. I liked to use that throwaway line every chance I got. He told me not to worry since he didn't have a return ticket to Kabul. He said he was concerned about getting it punched when he finally did go home. I appreciated his droll, Afghan humor. I had found it was often spoken in a sheepish manner around foreigners who tried to get their goats.

I would have the RSO shop in Kabul run background checks on both of the agents, but I didn't expect to find anything to suggest they might be involved in the kidnappings. I knew what I had to do next and doing it wouldn't be pleasant. I had to talk to the ambassador's wife about her daughter and Zeenat.

Beverly Thurman was a Foreign Service spouse who had willingly given up her career aspirations for those of her husband. It was a difficult situation that the department tried to address by providing employment opportunities at the embassy for the unemployed spouse. While tandem couples were more common these days, they were still a distinct minority. Tandems were a husband and wife who were both Foreign Service officers serving at the same post. The department tried its best to accommodate tandem couples, but the needs of the service dictum often superseded good intentions. Such officers were frequently assigned to separate countries and had to balance their children and their lives around their profession and the vagaries of Main State's assignment process.

As a practical matter, Mrs. Thurman couldn't accept employment at the embassy anyway. She was the ambassador's wife at a large and important Foreign Service post that had many

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demanding representational responsibilities. Years ago, such responsibilities were actually required of spouses at ambassadorial level and below. The officer's annual performance appraisal included an evaluation of the spouse's volunteer, charitable work and other contributions to the embassy's mission. The spouses, mostly wives, performed quasi-official duties for the U.S. government gratis, but with their rich uncle's sincere gratitude.

Involuntary servitude was alive and well in the Foreign Service then because slavery had been outlawed many years before. Uncle Sam got his money's worth out of its public servants, and then some, in those days. While such things were no longer expected or mandatory, there was still a strong cultural imperative for uncompensated service from those who weren't gainfully, or otherwise, engaged in promoting the greater good of America.

The ambassador's spouse was a special case since he or she was married to the number one person in the embassy. It was an expected duty and obligation that went with the territory. And financially, it wasn't an easy situation. The costs of holding many dinners, receptions and other events on behalf of the U.S. government added up. Career ambassadors were largely common folk without much money. They received a representational allowance from the department that really didn't go very far to cover expenses. They had to carefully balance their accounts or pay the price of being out-of-pocket.

The political appointees, on the other hand, were, most often, wealthy. Some were downright filthy rich; nouveau or otherwise. Old or new money didn't make any difference as long as it was long-green that could be spent by the respective political parties. The politicians had to be well-to-do in order to afford buying the plum overseas postings with their generous campaign contributions.

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However, career ambassadors didn't make much more money, if at all, than the average DS special agent. That was because the agent qualified for Law Enforcement Availability Pay or LEAP. That represented a 25 percent premium over base-pay and not an insignificant sum of money. The Leapers were envied by other Foreign Service officers who labored just as hard in the department's sweatshop. The difference was they didn't carry guns and couldn't arrest people for high crimes or misdemeanors. Their service just wasn't special enough for Uncle Sam. The rank-and-file agents finally got their reward for a change.

Sometimes good things did come to those who served, protected, and waited for fair remuneration and retribution.

Beverly Thurman was a handsome woman in her mid-forties. She welcomed me and we sat down on wicker chairs on the screened porch of the residence. I politely declined her kind offer of coffee, tea, or something stronger

"Mrs. Thurman, I'm sorry I have to ask you these questions, but it's important to get a sense of Alicia and Zeenat's personalities and behaviors to determine if there's anything that might help with the investigation." I paused for her reaction and then continued. "I really need to get inside their heads to find out what was going on in their lives. What were their likes and dislikes, who were their friends? Were there any particular boyfriends? Who were their close girlfriends and confidants? How were things going at school? Did either mention anything out of the ordinary or unusual in their school routines? Did either ever express any concerns regarding their personal safety? Have there been any recent turnovers of domestic staff? Were there any workers or deliverymen or repairmen at the residence in the last couple of weeks? Had any servants quit or called in sick since the

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kidnapping? Did you or the ambassador receive any unusual telephone calls? Were there any hang-ups?”

I quickly backpedaled on the last point by clarifying that I was referring to the telephone. She chuckled at my silliness and I was pleased that I could still bring joy to ordinary people under the most trying of circumstances.

“Dick, I’ve wracked my brain over the past couple of days for information that might help us find Zeenat and my daughter. I’ve given all the information I could think of to my husband and the RSO. There wasn’t much to give. I didn’t notice anything unusual in the girls’ school or living routines. They were, I’m sorry, are, just normal teenagers. Both are good students and enjoy school. They listen to music and watched CDs and play the video games like all the other kids their age. Zeenat lived in the guest quarters above the garage.”

She pointed in the direction of the garage and I looked. The place looked comfortable, I thought.

“Neither one had any special boyfriends,” she continued. “They’ve both attended supervised dances and other social events at the school. Their friends are always welcome here and often visit. I’ve already provided a list of their names to the RSO. I much preferred that arrangement to them going out, even with an escort. Fortunately, the tennis court and swimming pool were big draws for the kids. I admit I was always worried about their safety, but never considered the possibility of a kidnapping. My worry was more maternal, the same as when we lived in the States. I’m simply a doting mom. Both girls lived in a secure, sheltered environment. The residence is well-guarded by both private security guards and the Indian police. We’ve never had a problem of any sort before. A traffic accident was my biggest worry until now.”

She started crying and I looked away to give her a chance to compose herself. When she did, she completed answering my earlier questions.

She mentioned the backgrounds of the domestic staff and embassy drivers had been checked by the RSO before being hired. There had never been any problems with staff. Maintenance workers were always supervised by the embassy's general services staff. Personal deliveries for the family always went to the embassy first for security screening. Shopping for food and sundries was done by trusted staff as well. Security at the ISD was tight as the institution was often, and incorrectly, called the American School because of the large number of American students. The school administrators were extremely sensitive to security matters and took them seriously. As to phone calls, Mrs. Thurman said there hadn't been any unusual ones. She didn't mention any hang-ups she or her husband might have had and I didn't press the matter.

I asked her about the two APPF agents who guarded Zeenat. She said they seemed to be professional and presumably had been vetted by both the U.S. and Afghan governments prior to being assigned to protect her. Whenever Zeenat left the compound, one of the two agents would accompany her and she never noticed any exceptions to the rule. The agents were under strict orders from President Karzai and Zeenat was a compliant child who was well-behaved and there had been no problems with her.

I also asked her about the driver, Singh. She said Joe had been assigned from the embassy motor pool about six months ago following the retirement of another driver. I asked if we were talking about the same person. She laughed and said that Singh's second, given name was Joginder, hence the name Joe. He liked it she said since it made him feel more American. He was just a

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regular Joe, by her account. She also said he was a trusted embassy employee. Equally important to her was the fact he was a cautious, safe driver. She felt comfortable with Joe driving the girls around the city, adding that she worried about his safety too.

I'd run out of questions for the moment. I could easily get back to Mrs. Thurman anytime I wanted. After all, I knew where she lived. I thanked her for her time and promised that everyone was doing their best to get both girls safely returned soon.

Sometimes those who served and protected had to leave places totally empty-handed and headed.

Chapter 7

Comparing Scribbled Notes

Kali McAlister spoke first. It was her God given right since she was a lady. Chester and I sat in the task force room sipping cafe lattes from the cafeteria. I couldn't smoke and I really wanted a cigarette. I hoped Kali would make her presentation short and sweet so I could sneak out for a smoke before it was Chester's turn to speak. I didn't want to cut her spiel short, but I badly needed a hit of nicotine to calm my nerves. Thankfully, I wasn't addicted to department verbiage; only tobacco, although both consisted of a lot of smoke. I wasn't sure which one was more harmful to my health though. Unlike cigarettes, the noxious department stuff didn't come with a printed warning label. It would be a drag, but I would inhale both unhealthy fumes in equal measures just to be politically correct.

"I reviewed all of the communications intercepts for the day in question and the preceding and following days as well," Kali said, without introduction or fanfare. The first call to the cops came into the police communications center at precisely 8:47 in the morning. It was from a shop owner in the neighborhood who had witnessed the incident and reported the basic circumstances to the cops. The first patrol car arrived at the scene at 8:58 according to the dispatcher's account. What followed was a lot of head-scratching by the sounds of the chatter. There was nothing new from the transcripts so I won't go over them again unless you want me to or have any questions."

I didn't, nor did Chester, so I told her to move on.

Kali and I had earlier administered a security briefing to Chester and had him sign a State Department Secrecy Agreement so we were all legally defensible or equally culpable in the eyes of the law. He now had his security ticket and a need-to-know what Kali was disclosing. I suspected he would be underwhelmed by all of it. No matter, he was no longer an enemy combatant or illegal alien from another galaxy in the eyes of Uncle Sam. Fortunately, we wouldn't have to shoot him after we whispered our national or notional secrets. I felt good about that since I was a lousy shot and the noise always hurt my ears.

Chester piped-up by saying that he had interviewed the same witness who had first called the cops. He mentioned the guy had nothing pertinent to add to his story or the time-line we were trying to establish.

Kali continued her report in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner like we were taught in basic agent's class. She was very controlled and professional; actually, she was very hot!

I wondered if she acted the same way in bed. I was planning to find out one way or another, if she'd let me. I would do my best to win her over. Sometimes the sexual fantasies, ardors and bragging rights of those who served and protected knew no bounds, shame or credibility.

"I didn't have much luck with the overheads," Kali mentioned as I shook off my nasty thoughts for the moment. "There were no photo shots of the area in question by either government or commercial birds. That seems to be a dead end as far as leads are concerned."

Following her briefing, I told her to fill in the timeline on our white board with as much fact as she had gleaned since we at least had to look like we knew what we were doing. Regrettably, the column designated for Leads was empty. I hoped Chester had

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gotten better stuff from his cop friends. I left the room for a quick smoke. I realized I could enhance our collective ignorance and confusion if I had more smoke, plus a few mirrors.

I shook hands with Big Bird in the hallway as I was leaving the chancery to feed my addiction. He asked how things were going and I mentioned they were going nowhere fast, but we were still hoping to catch a break. I said I'd keep him up to speed, but didn't have anything to share at the moment. That comment reminded me that I had to share with Jersey Briggs too at some point soon. The best defense was a good offense, at least according to conventional department wisdom and wags. They were a very offensive bunch of people, so it made perfect sense.

When I returned to the room, Chester had posted the crime scene photos and sketches on the wall next to the white board. The facial pictures of Mohammed, the APPF agent, were particularly gruesome and I winced when I looked at them. I told Chester to begin.

“Kali's review of the intercepts jives with what I learned on the ground. Let me fill in some blank spots though,” he began.

I had no problem comprehending Chester's English since it was far better than mine. It must have been his British annunciation and, just perhaps, his superior education that made the difference. Regardless, I settled back in my chair and listened.

“First, and most obviously, this was a meticulously planned and executed operation; these guys were real pros. They spent no more than four minutes for the actual takedown. However, they must have spent weeks planning and practicing for the grab.”

He pointed to a couple of photos and a large sketch of the location to emphasize his points. He then walked us through a reconstruction of the kidnapping based on witness reports and police interviews.

“It was a classic squeeze play with the embassy vehicle blocked in the front by a fuel tanker that positioned itself across the entire narrow street. The chauffeur couldn’t perform a crash-bang maneuver against the truck to escape.”

Chester meant the truck couldn’t be rammed and pushed aside because it was too large and heavy. He showed us a photograph of the abandoned truck and, of course, he was right. The crash-bang technique was an effective method of evasion and escape against vehicles that could be literally swept aside. From a distance of ten yards or so, the maneuver required the ramming vehicle to slow down to about 10 miles an hour, drop the transmission into low gear for greater torque and then speed into the opposing vehicle. The best target for this sweeping technique was the rear quarter-panel where there was less weight to move. Small vehicles could move larger ones, but certainly not a tanker truck. The laws of physics simply couldn’t be broken.

“The street where it happened was unremarkable; typical and congested like you find throughout the city once you’re away from the main boulevards. Small shops lined both sides of the street. Above the shops were living quarters for the owners and their families. It’s the standard Indian living and working arrangement. It was a good spot for a snatch,” he added. The embassy driver couldn’t back-up or execute a “J” or bootleg turn either. That potential escape route was blocked by bad guys in a white van. More specifically, it was a Tata Ace mini-truck with a canvas tarp erected over the cargo bed. No one got a tag number and it’s likely it was stolen in the first place. There are about 250,000 vehicles of that make and model registered in greater Delhi and that was also the gang’s getaway vehicle. Except for Mohammed, the victims were shoved into the back of the van. The cops put out an APB on

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the vehicle, but that was largely perfunctory under the circumstances.

“Mohammed died a tough death though. He was shot once in the chest at close range with a nine millimeter round. The police forensics people are trying to get a fix on the bullet removed from his body. It might have some investigative or evidentiary value, but we’re going to have to wait a few days for the results. But he didn’t die of lead poisoning though. The cops speculate the shot was meant to shock and immobilize him so he couldn’t react; so that he couldn’t put up a fight while he was being garroted to death. That was the real coup de grace and a horrible way to die. His air supply was cut off and he suffocated to death. While being asphyxiated, the cord cut through his jugular vein and almost severed his neck. The person who did that was strong and merciless. In sum, Mohammed bled out and died quickly. By the way, the police want the embassy to tell them about Mr. Mohammed. They don’t believe he’s an Indian national based on his clothing, dental work, and, most notably, the set of credentials issued to him by the Afghan Presidential Protection Force. They want to know what’s going on and they wanted me to ask my masters.”

Kali and I briefly glanced at each other and I spoke first.

“Chester, Mohammed was an agent of the APPF and assigned to protect someone very important: Zeenat Karzai, the daughter of the President of Afghanistan.”

I let that point sink-in and then told him the circumstances of her stay at the ambassador’s residence. He was shaken and taken aback by the information; his face lost color and he sat down.

“We didn’t want to tell you before you visited the police. We had to know if they had picked-up on the fact or suspected

anything unusual in that regard. It was important to know what they knew. Are they aware of Zeenat's involvement?"

"No, but they're snooping around the ISD because a witness reported seeing two girls abducted, not one as the embassy claims. They smell a rat, as we Americans say." I was amazed at how quickly Chester had adapted to his adopted country.

I informed Chester that she was enrolled under an assumed name along with fictitious supporting data. It would take the cops a long time, if ever, to learn her true identity. Now that he was a U.S. citizen with a security clearance, Chester was legally and honor-bound not to disclose this information to the authorities. However, it was time for the ambassador to inform India's Prime Minister and hope he could keep a secret.

"Where are the cops at in their investigation?" I asked.

"They aren't too far along and the leads aren't particularly promising at this stage. They are following up on the forensic stuff such as the bullet from Mohammed's body, the stolen tanker truck, and they've put out an APB on the Tata Ace van. They're poring over both the embassy vehicle and tanker for any physical clues and are planning to re-interview witnesses to see if they missed anything during the first round of questioning. They had already put out a BOLO, a national alert, on the incident and its victims. They're also rounding-up the usual criminal suspects who specialize in kidnap and ransom operations, but so far they've come up empty-handed."

I told Chester to inform his police colleagues about the note and fingertip the embassy had received. We had to share some things with them if we expected any cooperation in return. I told him to stonewall the information regarding the demand for a U.S. pullout from Afghanistan and Zeenat Karzai's involvement since that stuff was still much too hot to handle. The ambassador had to

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finesse that piece of the story at a much higher level than my pay grade allowed.

I cautioned Chester not to reveal the contents of the note, only its existence. He was to play dumb on the point. He could inform his cop friends about the fingertip and that it was positively identified as belonging to Singh Singh, but nothing more at this point.

“Chester, what’s the word on the street about the kidnapping? What are the surmises and speculations as to who is behind the incident? Whodunit?” I asked in my best detecting voice.

“The authorities believe the kidnapping was politically motivated given the fact the target was the American ambassador’s daughter, at least as far as they know,” he answered. “What you told me about Zeenat wouldn’t change their minds, it would only reinforce the belief,” he quickly added.

“Okay, but what about likely suspects?” I inquired.

He responded that his cop colleagues had mentioned the possibility of al-Qaida involvement. It was an obvious guess. However, it might be an accurate one as well, I thought.

“Are there any other speculations?” Kali asked. “We don’t care how farfetched they might sound. We need at least a slim straw to grasp at this point.”

“Well, there was one thing I was going to mention,” Chester said. “It came from an old friend in the IB who has been on the job since Shiva was a pup. He said that the garroting of the security guard was almost ritualistic in nature. It was an up-close and very personal way of killing someone; an act reminiscent of the Thugs.”

“Are you joking?” I exclaimed.

My little outburst followed our assurance to Chester that we wanted to hear anything, no matter how absurd or ridiculous it might sound.

“No, I’m not, nor was he,” he forcefully replied. “The Thug cultists have been part of our culture and country for over three hundred years. They worshiped Kali, the goddess of death and destruction.”

I shot Kali a smirk and she shot me a middle finger in return. Maybe she was warming up to me.

“The cult’s name became transliterated to “thug” in the west. However, Thugs were a concern and force to be reckoned with here.”

Chester explained that the Thug cult practiced an organized campaign of robbery and assassination; and those ritualistic practices were called Thugee. Strangulation was the preferred method and choice for the murderers. Thugs claimed tens of thousands of victims during their reign of terror. They would insinuate themselves with their victims and, at an opportune time and place, strangle them to death by throwing a scarf or noose around their necks. Because of this practice, they were often referred to as “noose-operators.”

"Following a murder, they plundered and buried their victims in accordance with special religious rites. The common pickaxe was a consecrated object in their religious belief and a practical tool for burying their victims. Secrecy and stealth were hallmarks of their murderous trade. The Thugs believed that for each person killed, Kali’s physical return to wreak havoc on the planet would be delayed by one millennium."

I kept eyeing Kali, but she avoided my glances and attempts to tease her.

Chester went on to say that the Thugs preferred to kill their victims at night at certain suitable locations they knew well. Each member of a group had his own function to perform, such as luring the victim, serving as a lookout, holding the victim captive or

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burying them afterwards. Induction into the sect was sometimes passed down from father to son. Occasionally, the children of victims would be spared and groomed to become Thugs themselves. Elder Thugs, who were no longer strong enough to kill, were assigned duties as watchers, spies, and food preparers to earn their keep.

Chester said that sporadic attempts were made to suppress the cult, but it wasn't until the 1830s that the British took vigorous steps to eradicate them. In a span of only a few years, roughly 4,000 Thugs were hanged. The cult was presumed to be extinct at that point, but it wasn't and it simply went underground and continued to practice its morbid rites in greater secrecy until the present. Cases of Thuggee style assassinations continued to be investigated by the authorities over the years. There was great difficulty in determining whether a particular murder was a Thug act or one committed by a common criminal. Bodies were well-buried and, when discovered, it was often difficult to determine the exact cause of a death.

“What about Thug activity these days?” I interrupted.

Chester commented that the Indian authorities publicly dismissed the notion of Thugs still operating their trade because of the furor that such an admission would have on the people's collective psyche and sense of security. However, many officials believed in the cult's present existence and would probably admit the same over a couple of beers. It was a not-so-well-kept secret among the country's police and security organizations.

My mind was racing with the possibility, no matter how flaky or remote, of Thugs being responsible for the kidnapping. I really didn't believe it, but stranger things had happened during my long and arduous career, like getting promoted a couple of times. Therefore, anything was possible, I guessed.

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I gave my brief to Chester and Kali and I didn't have any good ideas, leads, or vibes about who might be responsible. The meeting broke and I drafted a cable to Jersey on the status of the investigation. I left out the Thug speculation because I didn't want to be ridiculed by my erstwhile friend and colleague.

Sometimes those who served and protected had to weasel-word their written thoughts for purposes of greater clarity and plausible denial.

Chapter 8

Chomping at the Bit

We needed a breakthrough and fast. I had Chester continue to prod and poke the cops to see if there was anything new or, more importantly, anything promising in terms of solid leads. Kali was finishing up with the intelligence stuff and then was heading to the International School of Delhi to snoop around. I would plod along by calling the RSO in Kabul via secure voice to see if there was anything back on the checks I asked for on the two APPF agents: Mohammed and Kamal. I'd also review the embassy files on Singh. Our team was running out of time and options. Moreover, I suspected that our victims were running out of time and options too. God help us, I thought. Some divine intervention might be necessary to remove the scales from our eyes.

I spoke to a DS agent named Mark, one of several assistant regional security officers assigned to the U.S. embassy in Kabul. I didn't know him, but he said he'd most definitely heard of me, but I didn't bother to follow-up on his remark. I asked what feedback he'd received so far regarding the APPF agents' backgrounds. His boss was aware of Zeenat's involvement in the kidnapping, but Mark wasn't. He was curious as hell as to why I was seeking such information. We were an overly inquisitive bunch for trained, government investigators.

I reminded him of the department's need-to-know dictum and that he shouldn't ask questions. His feelings were hurt, but I didn't care. I thought the new crop of young agents were a bit whiny and wimpy to begin with. I remembered the days when the needs of

the service really meant something. I could recall many a day and night when I'd have to strap on my gun and protect a foreign official at a moment's notice—time didn't belong to us in those days, I thought.

Either drunk or sober, we would answer the call of duty to protect and serve. For the record, I couldn't remember too many of those days due to my age, certainly not due to my imbibing. Regardless, the young agents seemed to be above the call to duty. How did you define loyalty, self-sacrifice, and professionalism these days?

Mark related that he had assigned two embassy local investigators to the task. He acknowledged it was being treated as an urgent matter. He related that the skinny on Mohammed and Kamal was totally favorable so far and their hands were clean. Their records and reputations were spotless, etc. etc. How come I felt like I was listening to an infomercial for Ivory Soap? I thanked Mark for the information, his assistance, and his own rendering of the clean-hands doctrine.

I got Singh Singh's official personal folder and security file. Joginder, a.k.a. Joe, had worked for the embassy about three years as a motor pool driver. He was one of many drivers in the pool until he got a promotion and his shot at stardom; the assignment to drive for the ambassador's family. He should have stayed in the shallow end of the pool because he was now in over his head. I noticed he had worked as a chauffeur for a few years for one of the big multinational companies in Delhi before joining the embassy. I continued to scan his file for any useful information to the point of causing my eyes to water and cross.

His bio reflected that Joe was married and he and his wife had a three year old girl and a three-month old boy. With a male child, Joe could now hold his head high in the neighborhood. They lived

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in a small, walk-up apartment building in one of Delhi's lower, middleclass neighborhoods. Lower middleclass in India meant that they lived in a nicer hovel than most people and not on the streets. He and his wife were doing well by local living standards.

The GOI criminal and security checks for Joe had come back clear. He wasn't a thieving subversive in the eyes of his government. Neighbors and coworkers spoke nice things about him and his former employer recommended him for a position of trust and responsibility with the embassy. There was only one entry, actually a footnote in his security file that caught my attention. His former employer mentioned that Joe had taken a three month, unpaid leave of absence. Joe hadn't mentioned that bit of information in his personal interview as an applicant for embassy employment. However, it was a short amount of time and not an uncommon omission.

Longer periods of unaccounted time required an explanation and corroboration. Three months was the magical cutoff point for corroboration and he had just made it under the wire. However, an explanation was asked for and received. A note in the file indicated that Joe had to take care of his sick father in Banaras. He stated that he was the eldest son in the family and it was a customary and expected duty. Apparently, the explanation made sense to the investigator.

While Joe's omission about his unpaid leave of absence on his security questionnaire (and during the personal interview) wasn't particularly remarkable in itself, it was still something to follow-up on. I was still clinging to hope and grasping at those straws, but I still awaited the divine intervention part. Since Joe was likely tied up at the moment, I'd speak to his wife. Like with the ambassador's spouse, it wouldn't be a pleasant meeting, but it had

to be done. Anyway, who's better at reading and understanding the feelings of vulnerable women I would ask?

I got Chester on his cell phone and told him we had to talk to Mrs. Singh about Joe's missing time issue. I instructed him to buy a baby gift for Joe's wife as an icebreaker and a gesture of goodwill. There were already rumblings that she was pressing the embassy for compensation. I needed her cooperation and support in the investigation and the gift might help thaw relations.

I had a quick lunch in the chancery cafeteria and a couple of cigarettes as I waited for Chester to collect me and head to Mrs. Singh's apartment. Kali was still busy with her inquiries at the ISD, so I'd try to catch up with her later. We were doing all the right things in terms of conducting the investigation, but we needed a break. Maybe prayer and wishful thinking would help since I was willing to try just about anything.

Chester and I sat in the back of the embassy sedan as it wove its way through the heavy traffic. We arrived at Mrs. Singh's home about 30 minutes later, not bad time, all things considered. We didn't have an appointment and I guessed we wouldn't need one. With two kids to take care of, she wouldn't stray far from her apartment. We negotiated the outside stairs, ducking the laundry hanging out to dry on the makeshift clotheslines. It was a noisy, crowded tenement building. She and Joe lived in a unit on the second floor. There was a communal bath and bathroom at the end of the hall and it stunk to high heaven or nirvana.

Chester introduced us and we were invited inside. Mrs. Singh was in her late thirties by my guess. She was dressed in a traditional sari and had her hair tied back in a bun. A dark-haired little girl hid behind her skirts and a baby was sitting in a makeshift crib in the living room. There was a small kitchenette and a separate room off a short hall, the master bedroom I

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suspected and the only bedroom. Mrs. Singh graciously offered us hot tea and we accepted. It was a customary, social ritual and I didn't want to offend her so I went along with the drill. I hoped she had some sugar to go with it. That was an accompanying, customary, and social ritual for me because I hated the stuff otherwise. A little milk would be nice touch too, but I wasn't going to push my luck.

Mrs. Singh's English was excellent. I wasn't surprised because the British did a good job imposing their values and language on their colonial subjects. We Americans were similarly blessed by the Brit's linguistic largesse, but our English ain't so good.

"Mrs. Singh, I'm sorry to bother you, and I realize the police have spoken to you already, but I have a few questions to ask. I hope you don't mind." I also hope you don't mind if I don't mention your husband's severed fingertip. She said she didn't mind.

"Did your husband ever mention any concerns about his personal safety while working for the embassy?"

She said he never mentioned any specific concerns, but terrorism was a world-wide phenomenon and they talked about world affairs sometimes, especially those events occurring on the subcontinent.

"Did your husband ever indicate that he had been threatened or did he have any enemies who might be responsible for his disappearance?" I knew the answers, but had to go through the standard litany of questions.

She replied that he didn't have any enemies; they lived a simple, quiet life. There weren't any threats against his life to her knowledge.

I went to the baby's crib and picked the boy up. Mrs. Singh beamed and was touched by my act of kindness. I asked her how

she was holding up under the circumstances and was there anything the embassy could do to help in this difficult time?

She thanked me and said she was coping as best she could. She was worried about her husband and the family's future. She mentioned that the Human Resources people at the embassy had been in regular contact with her since the incident. They had been especially helpful and she was grateful for their support.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke and I felt sorry for her and her children. Without a husband bringing in a steady paycheck, she faced a difficult life.

"How are Joginder's parents and relatives doing?" I asked.

"Joe's mother is elderly and feeble and not doing particularly well. His sister and brothers are coping on a day-to-day basis, but it's not easy for any of us," she cried.

"What about Joe's father? How's he doing? It must be very difficult for him as well," I said, as I put the baby down.

"Joe's father died when he was an infant and was raised by an uncle in his adopted hometown of Banaras. He's very worried about him too."

I told her I was sorry and mentioned that the American embassy and U.S. government were doing their best to bring her husband back to her, quickly and safely. I avoided using the word "alive." Regardless, I think she got the message loud and clear. I only hoped we would get the same response from our thoughtful gift.

I thanked her for her time and again apologized for intruding. Before leaving, I presented her with the gift that I had Chester buy at one of the electronics stores—a baby monitor. She knew immediately what it was and thanked us profusely. She and her husband could never afford such a luxury on his salary. I told her it was from her good friends in America. She cried, but this time

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with tears of joy. The gift had taken away some of her grief, at least for a time. I rubbed my eyes too. The overwhelming cooking fumes from the kitchen were making them sting and itch and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

Chester setup the monitoring system and showed her how it worked. She could now leave the children for short periods of time without worrying about them. She placed the small monitoring device, a receiver, on a chain around her neck. It could pick up the slightest sounds of trouble from the kids. Now she could hang the laundry and socialize with the neighbors without having to constantly worry about the safety of her children. The monitor's speaker would be kept in the living room, just below a statue of the goddess Kali.

The monitoring device was sensitive enough to pick-up minute noises anywhere in the small apartment. Chester continued working with her to set things up properly. He also gave her extra, rechargeable batteries for the unit. I think she felt liberated for the first time in her life. She now had a live-in babysitter—a baby wallah, in the local parlance, that would be the envy of her neighbors. We said our goodbyes and left. I felt good about our conversation and was proud to be a generous, considerate American once again.

After we got to the street, I told Chester to give the second baby monitor, a.k.a. radio receiver, to his security service colleagues sitting in a car down the road. At our instruction, they had set up a 24/7 surveillance of the Singh residence. The IB agents already had the phone tapped and now we had a listening device inside the apartment. It was low-tech, but extremely effective means of monitoring all conversations. The baby monitor I gave Mrs. Singh was a Phillips Model SCD 0590. It worked-off an encrypted, digital signal that other portable communications

devices (such as cell phones and cordless telephones) couldn't interfere with. It would nicely serve our purpose.

With the second receiver, the IB agents could be a distance of up to 900 feet from the building and still receive crystal-clear reception. The portable tape recorder would capture all the gurgles, a random goo-goo and any other gibberish of an incriminating nature. It was \$149 of Uncle Sam's money well-spent.

Sometimes those who served and protected did things on the cheap and in a babyish manner.

Mrs. Singh's comment that Joe's father died many years ago when he was a child didn't jive with what he told the embassy when he was hired. He said he had to take a leave of absence to care for his father. Uncle or father; the terms could sometimes be interchanged in complicated family situations, but I didn't think so in this case.

It seemed to me that Joe was hiding the fact that he took a three month sabbatical. But why was the question? What could he have done during that three-month period that he didn't want anyone to know about? What were his secrets? What might they have to do with the kidnapping? What was the meaning of life? I didn't know the answers to any of those questions, I mused. However, I did know that it had been a long day and I was tired. I directly headed to my hotel room to relax.

The embassy had done well by me in arranging for my digs. They put me up at the Taj Palace Hotel, a Hyatt, just a short walk from the chancery. It was built as a palace in the 1930s and had five stars. I planned to be one of them during my stay and now it was time to unwind and pamper myself.

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I finished a long, hot shower and put on thongs, both for my feet and loins. I covered myself with the hotel's fluffy white robe and turned on the BBC news. It was a smoking room and I guiltlessly enjoyed a cigarette without worrying about the smoking cops knocking on my door. Just as I was thoroughly kicked-back and relaxed, there was a loud knock at the door and I immediately ran to the toilet to flush my cigarette. I had momentarily forgotten that I was legal and had nothing to worry about.

Sometimes old habits and guilt complexes died hard for those who served and protected.

I composed myself and answered the door and it wasn't the cops or housekeeping. It was Kali McAlister holding a bottle of wine and two glasses. She had brought a chilled bottle of white Zinfandel. I was instantly aroused and excited by the prospects since I couldn't find a decent Zinfandel on the hotel wine list. Kali asked if she could come in. That was like her asking if I enjoyed whipped cream on my strawberry shortcake. I licked my lips at the image and invited her inside.

"Dick, since we were both out and about and missed each other today, I thought this would be a good time to catch up and compare notes," she said.

I agreed and suggested she sit down to be more comfortable.

Comparing case notes was a standard investigative strategy between a beautiful black woman and an older, white gentleman, as I recalled from my younger days in DS.

It was evident that Kali was the consummate professional given her demeanor and dress. Her demeanor was hot; her manner of dress even hotter. She was wearing a tight, low-cut blouse and even tighter, low-cut jeans. She wasn't wearing a bra and her erect nipples pointed in my direction when she was facing me. I took that as an encouraging sign.

Why did some people criticize the younger generation about the way they dressed? I didn't understand that attitude since I liked what I saw.

"I finished reviewing the satellite imagery and communications intercepts. There was nada, zip, zilch useful information; a total waste of time. I then headed to the ISD and talked to the administrators, teachers, and a few student friends of Alicia's. Getting onto the grounds and into the administration building was like trying to get into Fort Knox without a formal, gilded invitation. They take security very seriously," she laughingly said.

She paused to open the wine with the corkscrew she had brought with her. The woman was really organized and thoughtful, probably a result of her vigorous DS training regimen.

"By the way, the school doesn't have a clue about Zeenat," she continued. "They bought the embassy party-line that she had been withdrawn from class due to illness and all wished her a speedy recovery. I told them she returned home to Bangladesh to stay with her family until she was feeling better. Regardless, the American sponsored cultural exchange program would continue, I reassured them. I also mentioned she was looking forward to returning to the ISD as soon as possible."

"I told them she already missed her friends and teachers. They all signed a handmade get-well card for her and asked me to get it to her, if I could. She was a good student and would be missed. They were terribly worried and upset about Alicia as well. They were still stunned that something like this could happen in Delhi. They had redoubled student-faculty security awareness training and dusted-off the school's emergency response plans," she added.

Kali didn't seem to be in the least bit embarrassed or bothered that I was sitting across from her wearing just thongs, a thong, and

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a robe. She looked directly into my eyes when she spoke and she must've been a good poker player since I couldn't read her mind. My mind wandered so it was doubly difficult to gauge her mental state accurately. Obviously, I was smitten and confused. Smitten meant hard in English, I believed. Regardless, I was thoroughly familiar with the word confused. It was a common denominator for situations like this. Horny was another.

Kali got up from her chair and sat next to me on the sofa and poured us both another glass of wine. I was already feeling its giddy effects. The wine and cigarettes, without any food, made me lightheaded. My nervousness didn't help either and I was starting to swoon.

"Dick, I have a confession to make."

I wondered if I should put on a white shirt backwards to hear it, but I decided not to get up. I was already up and didn't want to look like a moving pup-tent in front of her since the other thing was about to drop.

"I've always had a strong thing for a guy who's a cop, detective, or investigator; private or otherwise."

Kali poured me another glass of wine while she spoke.

"The long and short of it is that I have a dick fetish! As for you, your name simply adds to my desire and fantasy. God, I can't help myself. Dick, I'm so weak and ashamed of my feelings. I knew I had this hang-up, urge, kink, fetish, thing or whatever, since adolescence. Jim Rockford was one of my many imaginary lovers," she continued. "God, he was so hot, and you remind me of him! I just loved his sense of humor and his unorthodox style of conducting investigations. I admit I loved the bulge in his trousers too. He was muy sexy, and one damn fine detective in my book. I never missed a single episode and have them all on tape. They're part of my huge porn stash."

She pressed closer to me and put a hand on my upper thigh. The room was spinning out of control for me. “Why do you think I got into this line of work?” she asked. “It was only natural. Where could I better meet and hook-up with real-life detectives? It was the ideal hunting ground to satisfy my warped desires and outrageous kinks. Of course, the younger guys would hit on me all of the time and it was always a pain. That’s why I’ve been pegged as a dyke for most of my life. I refused to put out for them because I wasn’t interested in boys, only in real men, like you, Dick.”

“When I met you I knew I was in trouble. My sexual urges were strong at the very beginning. I rolled your name over-and-over again in my mind and on my tongue. I was having nasty fantasies about being in bed with you——.”

I was starting to doze-off. My ardor had quickly headed due south and went limp. And then I passed out. I crashed hard at that point. I had blacked out and was down for the count, but I had the weirdest fantasies and dreams the entire night. I vividly dreamed that Kali had seduced and sexually abused me in every possible way. That would be up, down, and sideways. During my unconscious state, she performed the most lewd, vile, and disgusting sexual acts on my body. Regardless, I thoroughly enjoyed every perverted word, gesture, and act. I didn’t remember the curtain call though. Did the fat lady really sing? I didn’t know, but I enjoyed the most satisfying, ultimate, out-of-body experience one could imagine.

I awoke the next morning hung-over and that was very strange since I could easily handle a couple of glasses of Zinfandel and still stay awake to work a protective security detail. However, I simply couldn’t remember what happened the previous night. I knew Kali came over and we talked, but not much else. I was sore and my precious bodily fluids seemed depleted. Maybe I had a wet

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dream with multiple climaxes. In any case, my bed now looked like Sumo wrestlers had put on a performance during the night. It was a tag-team match, no less. I walked to the sitting room and immediately saw a note on the coffee table and picked it up and read it.

It was from Kali: *Dearest Richard, I hope you enjoyed last night. I certainly did. You were a great lover and boy-toy. Thank you for releasing my many pent-up demands and quirks. By the way, your screams resulted in the front desk calling a couple of times for you to hold down the noise. I explained that you were suffering from Delhi-belly and the clerks were sympathetic. There won't be any formal complaints from the hotel management, so don't worry. See you in the office. Connie. P.S. Don't bother scheduling a prostate exam—yours is firm and flat. Salud my friend!*

Jesus, I had been screwed-blue without remembering getting a henna tattoo! I had been had and I felt used and cheap. I had been date-raped by a colleague. I would have trouble holding my head up in public with the large scarlet letter hanging around my neck, I ruefully thought. It would be a fluorescent, flashing capital A—for asshole, I suspected. Rape counseling was out of the question. I had to deal with the emotional consequences of this most egregious act on my ego and manhood alone.

Rohypnol truly was a wonder-drug because I wondered what Kali had done unto me. In any event, the chemistry must've been good because I didn't feel or remember a thing. Turnabout wasn't always fair play. However, payback wouldn't be a bitch, it would be a Dick. Next time, I vowed to be awake while Dick Junior climaxed. More than anything though, I hoped I'd behaved like a gentleman. Someone must be held responsible for proper bedroom decorum. In good conscience, or in this instance, conscious,

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Foreign Service manners and comportment should count for something under the circumstances. Shouldn't they?

I shaved and took a vigorous shower. I finally felt better and more like my normal self, a macho man who had just been neutered.

Chapter 9

Raj Americana

Kali greeted me with a big, shit-eating grin. I stuck my tongue out at her to show her I wasn't in the least bit cowed by last night's little escapade. Exchanges like that were commonplace between peers who have just screwed each other's brains out; even though one of them wasn't the slightest bit cognizant of the circumstances. Was it good for you, Dick? I mused. Hell if I knew, I mused back to my muse. Truthfully, I wasn't amused one bit by the whole episode. More to the point, I was sorely pissed because I didn't do her first. I detested playing second fiddle while being one-upped. I had to be seated first-chair—always. In other words, I hated being fucked by someone else!

A meeting was reconvened to go over case developments. It was now show and tell time, I thought. I invited the Big Bird to our get-together. He could get the latest information and status of the investigation directly from the horse's mouth rather than its opposite end by me telling him later. Information sharing was considered good form and a sound time-management technique by some. However, my sense was that if more than one person knew something, it was no longer a secret.

I asked Kali to give us a rundown on what she had learned yesterday. She recounted her review of the satellite imagery and communications intercepts held by the station. I had heard all of that stuff last night—I thought. She went on to tell about her visit to the ISD. From her monologue, there were only two takeaway points that I could discern. The first was that security was tight at

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the school and that was why the bad guys didn't grab the girls there. The second was the fact that Zeenat Karzai's involvement in the matter wasn't known or suspected by the school officials. That was a good thing in itself because we still needed time to move the investigation forward before the news media or police unraveled the truth.

I spoke next and briefed them on my telephone conversation with the RSO in Kabul and that Mohammed and Kamal appeared to be squeaky clean. I then turned to Joe Singh's security file and personnel folder. I explained my concerns about the time discrepancy and told them about our conversation with Mrs. Singh. I mentioned that agents from the IB had tapped her telephone and planted surveillance personnel outside her apartment. Its flap and seal technicians were opening and reading incoming and outgoing letter mail. She didn't have a computer or cell phone from what we could tell. I informed Big Bird and Kali about secreting a listening device, the baby monitor, inside the Singh residence. Maybe we would get lucky.

Chester had been squirming in his chair for the past thirty minutes. It looked like he was going to burst out of his Nehru jacket. This had better be good, I thought. We needed something tangible to run with. However, his news wasn't good. It was great!

"I got a call very early this morning from one of the IB surveillance agents assigned to the Singh residence," Chester began. "Mrs. Singh had a visitor at about 5:30 this morning, almost at sunrise. A man's voice was heard on the monitor speaking with her. He told her that her husband was safe and doing well and that things were progressing as planned. The voice said Joe would be home in the next week or so if the Americans acquiesced to the demand to pull all of its troops out of Afghanistan. He said that if they didn't, they were going to be in

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for another unpleasant surprise. It was clear to the agents that Mrs. Singh knew the visitor and was extremely deferential to him during the conversation. She called him uncle a couple of times.”

“Richard, I tried calling you at your hotel, but didn’t get an answer.”

I told him I had taken a sleeping pill to get a good night’s rest. I discreetly glanced at Kali and frowned. She didn’t respond and looked away. I would discipline her later in private in my good time and way. That would be an interesting test of wills and endurance. I planned to come out on top this time.

“Richard, there’s more,” Chester carried on. “One of the IB agents tailed the visitor to the central train station in New Delhi. Our visitor purchased a one-way, second-class ticket to Banaras. The agent didn’t board the train, but called ahead to his counterparts in Banaras. They were able to identify the suspect when he arrived at the station in the city. He took a municipal minibus to the ghats on the Ganges. They followed him to the entrance to the largest and oldest crematorium in the city. His name is Amar and he’s the head Dalit for the Manikarnika Ghats crematorium. By the way, he’s one freaking, scary guy according to my IB sources.”

We now had the break we’d been looking for. Joginder Singh was dirty and his wife knew something about what was going on. I wasn’t sure how involved or knowledgeable she was, but she knew that her husband was safe from the very beginning of this little drama. Her tears were a crock—crocodilian. Therefore, I’d make sure to skin her alive after all was said and done. Her hide would make a nice purse or belt or other fashion accessory in the end. Ok Mrs. Singh, see you later gator. By the way, don’t leave town, my dear, I thought.

This is the point in an investigation where DS agents shout Eureka! They grab their ass with both hands and thank God for showing them the way. It was a watershed, rather than woodshed, event for a change. There was still much to do, but we could now rock-and-roll with the best of them. It was time to be offensive and I excelled at playing that position.

We had much to do and little time to do it so I enlisted Big Bird's help. I asked him to contact the HR people in the embassy. They were to call Mrs. Singh and ask her to come to the chancery this afternoon to go over some paperwork so her husband's pay could continue without interruption. It was just a routine, but necessary, matter to attend to. It was also a ruse to get her out of her apartment. I instructed the Bird to send an embassy car to collect her and return her home after her meeting with the Human Resources folks. While Mrs. Singh was being consoled and scammed at the chancery, IB agents would toss her apartment for evidence of Joe's complicity in the crime.

I told Kali to get with the CIA station and FBI legal attaché and run Amar's name through their files to see if he popped up on their radar screens. I instructed Chester to start compiling a biographical profile on Amar. I wanted to know everything about him—from Amar to Zed. I wanted to see all of his warts. Chester didn't understand that comment, so I had to explain it to him. Fortunately, I didn't ask him if Amar picked his toes in Poughkeepsie. That would have taken much too long to decipher. I told the team to regroup in the task force room at 4 o'clock sharp to compare notes. In the meantime, I'd head to my hotel room for a nap. I was exhausted for reasons I couldn't clearly recall. Old age (and a handful of roofies) did that to me every time.

I slept soundly, but still awoke early enough to make our 4 o'clock rendezvous. I looked forward to hearing what the others

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had learned. I sat down in our conference room just as the clock struck four.

The Big Bird confirmed that Mrs. Singh showed up on time for her 1 o'clock meeting with the embassy's Human Resources Department; thanks to the scheduling and timing of the embassy driver. The Bird said everything went smoothly and Mrs. Singh didn't have a clue that she'd been lured away from home. Before she left, the HR folks gave her a bouquet of flowers and assured her everything would be okay.

Kali mentioned that neither the station nor the FBI Legatt had any information on file regarding Amar or the crematorium in Banaras. Both organizations said they would make discreet inquiries with their opposite numbers in the Indian government and get back to us with any results soonest. They understood the matter was a political hot potato and would carefully handle all inquiries with kid gloves.

Since when did the spooks and the FBI start wearing kid gloves? Traditionally, chainmail fists were standard issue for agents of both outfits. Maybe things really had changed for the better since I retired.

The only gloves we ever got from the department were the latex ones used during our annual proctologic exams at Main State. However, these were never given out before the bending-over exercise. No matter, the little ritual constituted regular sex for many Foreign Service officers. And requests for second opinions were commonplace. It was an ideal situation for many officers because the act was free and impersonal too.

Chester spoke up next and said "the black-bag job at Singh's apartment yielded some interesting things. During the search, the IB agents found Joe's passport. They took photos of each page showing exit and entrance stamps. Here they are."

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We looked at the 8 x 11 inch, black and white, glossy photographs that Chester handed us. We spread them on the table so everyone could easily examine them. The snapshots were of good quality and it was easy to read the entries since there weren't too many.

Joe was not a world traveler by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, his only travel outside of India was for a trip lasting about ten weeks in early 2001. More specifically, the pages showed only two entries. Both were stamped by the Indian immigration authorities at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. Those showed his departure and return dates for India.

The dates in question coincided with the leave of absence Joe took from his former employer. His father must have been resurrected somewhere abroad. Maybe miracles did happen in this part of the world, but I was a bit skeptical. What I found interesting was the fact there were no visas in the passport or any entry or departure stamps from other countries. Several countries did not stamp one's passport for different reasons. It didn't mean the traveler didn't receive a visa, only that it wasn't affixed inside the passport.

The best known country for this practice was Israel. The Israeli government would issue visas on separate pieces of paper. No entry or departure information would be stamped in the visitor's passport. The reason was stigmatization since travelers with Israeli stamps in their passports would often be denied entry to Arab and Muslim countries. Issuing a visa detached from the passport got around that problem.

"Joe had disappeared outside his country for ten plus weeks. Where did he go and what did he do?" I wondered aloud. I suspected we were all asking ourselves the same question, but no one ventured a good guess as to his whereabouts. He claimed he

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was attending to his sick father in Banaras during the time in question. Of course, that was pure bullshit.

Chester then dropped his second shoe. I knew this would be his last surprise for the day since he had only two feet to work with like the rest of us mortals.

“The search also revealed a framed photograph of Joginder Singh, along with unidentified others, dressed in military-style garb and holding an AK-47 assault rifle in a group picture. The photo was undated and the landscape in the background could be almost anywhere in the world,” he said.

Chester then produced a photo of the photo for us to look at. There were three other figures in the photo. Chester believed they were Indian by their general appearance and facial features, but couldn't be positive since they all looked the same to his American eye. He said the mix of Indian ethnicity, especially in the Punjab where Joe came from, made such identifications almost impossible.

I stopped looking at the photo and thought about what Chester had just said: in the Punjab? I didn't see Punjab mentioned on Joe's security questionnaire.

I turned to Chester. “Why did you say that Joe was from the Punjab? I thought he was from a province in the north of India.”

Chester chuckled at my question. “Richard, they're often one and the same location. Old Punjab was a large land mass in the north of India that was partitioned in 1947 when the nation of Pakistan was created. Arbitrary political lines separated the Punjabis into two parts of the former whole. Most of the Muslim Punjabis lived in the west in the part that is now Pakistan. Most of the Punjabis in the east, in India, were Sikhs and Hindu. There was a lot of disruption and population movement following partitioning due to intolerance and violence among the ethnic and

religious clans. Things are still tense today with the Sikh separatist movement in the disputed region of Kashmir.

“Singh is a common Punjabi name and could belong to a Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, or atheist. However, the name Singh is most often associated with the Sikh religion. Regardless, it’s certainly a name originating in the Punjab, despite where Joe was born, or subsequently lived, or which religion he practices. Many Indian names are associated with geographic places. I don’t believe that there’s an exact corollary in the United States,” he said.

“What about the Pennsylvania Dutch?” I pointedly asked. Chester started laughing at my serious question.

“That’s funny, Richard. The Pennsylvania Dutch didn’t emigrate from the Netherlands. Dutch is a transliteration of the word Deutsche or German. The ancestors of many of the original settlers in Pennsylvania were from Germany. Simply pick up a phone directory and look at all of the Germanic names. The real Dutch settled in New York State for the most part,” he added.

I laughed too even though I didn’t know that bit of trivial Americana. No wonder Chester had done so well on the citizenship test we administered to him. I was chagrined and embarrassed by my gaffe, but I didn’t show it. But my pride and ego were sorely bruised since I had been humiliated twice in the past 24 hours. However, my revenge was being chilled since it was best served cold and on the rocks. I had something specifically in mind for Kali, but I couldn’t stick it to Chester in quite the same way.

“Let’s move on,” I said. “Chester, get with the IB and have the passenger manifests checked for all flights for the dates in question. Mr. Singh Singh’s name should be on one of them, regardless of his pedigree,” I added.

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It turned out Amar's name meant immortal in Sanskrit. I had just gotten another lesson in the Indian name game from Chester. I didn't enjoy the tutorial, but managed to grin through my clenched teeth. Amar was his name and immortality was his game, I thought. It was totally befitting his position and vocation as the head Dalit at the Ghats Manikarnika crematorium in Banaras. He was Death Incarnate and personified too; an over-the-top character and one scary ghoul.

The IB branch in Banaras only had a thin file on Amar. He was a mysterious, secretive figure who had run the ghats' crematorium for at least the past ten years. He was shunned and feared by the people given his profession and because he was a Dalit, the lowest-of-the-low in India's formal and complicated social order. Amar lived and worked at the crematorium and wasn't seen often in public. When he was spotted, it was usually at night. He would always be seen wearing a white robe; the color representing perpetual mourning along with a short kris slung around his waist.

Chester pointed out that the kris was not a weapon indigenous to India. Its origins were traced to Malaysia, southern Thailand, Indonesia and the southern Philippines—all Islamic religious strongholds. Functionally, the kris was not a slashing weapon like a Bowie or other fighting knives, but rather a stabbing instrument. If a kris fighter had stealth on his side, the weapon was lethal. There were many stories of a kris being made especially for killing a specific person or ethnic group of people. Regardless, the gashing wound made by a kris was terrible because the edge of the blade danced in the wound and left tatters of dead flesh.

A kris had a cranked hilt which served as a support for the stabbing strike. At the same time, it allowed additional strength of the wrist to the pressure on the blade while slashing and cutting. The knife provided no special protection for the hand, except for

the broad blade at the hilt, which offered some limited protection. In rare cases, a kris blade was made to rotate around its axis while fixed in the hilt. The idea was to get the blade automatically turning to slip past the ribs for a fatal strike and it was one nasty weapon in the right hands.

I didn't think my old gravity knife would measure up in any of these respects. Stiletos must be out of fashion with these folks. People could be so picky when it came to fancy knives and designer footwear these days, I mused.

A man would typically wear a kris for both everyday use and special ceremonies. Heirloom blades were handed down through successive generations. A yearly ritualistic cleansing of the knife was required as part of the mythology and mystique surrounding the weapon. Did you have a happy Knife Cleaning Day, my friend? I wondered.

I'd heard enough. I would never think of kindly Kris Kringle in quite the same way again. For me, he would forever be a jolly Jack-the-Ripper character. What I'd just heard shook my confidence and bravado to my core and then some. However, we now had a second name to tag on Death's master-of-ceremonies and Kris Amar it would be.

We had to leave for Banaras as soon as possible. I told Chester to fly to the city and meet us there in the morning. Kali and I would take the overnight express train. Kris Amar (and hopefully the two girls) awaited us.

Sometimes those who served and protected anglicized those names and things they couldn't pronounce or understand or that frightened them.

Chapter 10

Mother Ganges Express

We boarded the train and it slowly pulled away from New Delhi. Our journey to Banaras, now called Varanasi by the modernists, would take us about 375 kilometers south of Delhi. It was an ancient city and the holiest in India. Pilgrims, by the tens of thousands, would visit each year to venerate Mother Ganges and bathe in her waters. Kali and I would play the role of American tourists and see the sights of the city. I wasn't sure she could pull off the role because she wasn't particularly loud or obnoxious, but we'd have to risk it.

We had our own compartment with a private bath. Before dinner, we enjoyed drinks in the nicely appointed lounge car. We both ordered wine and I told the bartender to put the drinks on Kali's tab. No tipping was allowed on the train so I didn't have to ask her to cough up a gratuity too. That was one unpleasantness out of the way. Anyway, she already owed me big-time for treating me like a piece of raw meat.

We were assigned the second seating at dinner. I complained since I was a first-class passenger, but my plea made no difference with the waiter. He gave us starched napkins and an equally fixed, starched menu. Tonight, the fare was rice pilaf, followed by Rice-A-Roni, followed by rice pudding. We had Sake for an aperitif.

Smoking turned out to be a serious problem on the train. It was a problem because I couldn't. It was prohibited, banned, and otherwise not tolerated inside the confines of the cars. The nasty habit; the ban I meant, was picked up by the Indians from their

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former British masters. The trainers were ruthless in its enforcement and sticklers for detail, right down to the letter of the rule with no ifs, ands, or butts allowed.

I had to somehow overcome this little inconvenience before I went totally bonkers from nicotine withdrawal. It would be like trying to solve a riddle, inside a puzzle, inside an enigma. I liked working the Sudoku games. Like those brain teasers, the answers were obvious, but the solutions more difficult and I enjoyed the Confucian dichotomy. That meant I didn't have a clue what to do.

The pragmatic, Western answer was I would have to smoke my Marlboros outdoors so I opened an exterior door and gingerly straddled the couplings between the cars like I was riding bowlegged on horseback. As the train swayed back-and-forth, to-and-fro, and hither-and-yon at 50 miles per hour, I puffed and coughed to my heart's content.

The smoking workaround worked well until early the following morning. That was when I found that a kid had taken my smoking spot. He was scrawny and raggedly dressed; one who looked like a brown-faced character out of a Dickens novel. But please don't be concerned with my angst over this situation.

It was a proven fact that Indian children were pliable and supple; and resilient to accidental falls from trains speeding through the desolate countryside. OK, I waited until the train slowed down at a sharp curve. In actuality, I had just saved the ragamuffin from inhaling noxious, secondhand smoke. I celebrated my benevolence by having an extra cigarette. Thankfully, I had just kicked another bad habit.

We disembarked about 10 o'clock and were met at the platform by a real Dumbo. He led the way to the taxi stand some distance away. By the way, he was definitely a male. I was envious and Kali was excited because she'd never seen an animal

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crap so much before. I watched where I stepped and wished I'd been as careful during my department career. We grabbed a taxi and headed downtown to our hotel; however, we didn't take the first vehicle offered, but chose one at random as a standard security precaution. DS tradecraft must be practiced to be perfected. We had some reservations about our safety, but not with our hotel accommodations since we were confident, confirmed guests at the local Hilton.

Chester had briefed us on the city of Banaras, the cremation rites, and the river Ganges, but I picked up a pamphlet in the hotel lobby that tooted and touted the city's horn and charm. It was written by the Banaras Tourist Bureau. I should get a fat royalty check for citing it here. However, it was important to understand and guard against the diversities and religiosity one might face in this holiest of Indian cities.

The name of the Ganges is known throughout India and much of the world. The river runs for 1,560 miles from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. To Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, it's much more than just flowing water. The river is life, purity, and a goddess to the people of India. The river is Ganga Ma, "Mother Ganges." Her name and story are known throughout the land. It is the story of how she poured herself down from heaven upon the ashes of King Sarga's sons. Her waters would raise them up again to dwell in peace in heaven. Anyone who touched her purifying waters even today are said to be cleansed of all sins.

As soon as the day begins, devout Hindus begin to give their offerings of flowers or food, throwing handfuls of grain or garlands of marigolds or pink lotuses into the Ganges. Others will float small oil lamps on its surface. Every morning thousands of Hindus, whether pilgrims or residents, make their way into the

holy water of the river. All of them face the rising sun with folded hands murmuring prayers.

The Ganges is a place of death and life. Hindus from all over will bring their dead to its banks. Whether a body, or just ashes, the waters of the Ganga are needed to reach Pitriloka, the World of the Ancestors. Just as in the myth with King Sargas' 60,000 sons who attained heaven by Ganga pouring down her water upon their ashes, so the same waters of Ganga are needed for the dead in the Hindu belief today. Without this, the dead will exist only in a limbo of suffering, and would be troublesome spirits to those still living on earth. The waters of the Ganges are called amrita, the "nectar of immortality."

Cremation anywhere along the Ganges is desirable. If that's not possible, then the relatives might later bring the ashes of the deceased to the river. Sometimes, if a family cannot afford firewood for cremation, a half-burned corpse will be thrown into the water. For the living, bathing in the Ganges is just as important. Hindus will travel many miles to have their sins washed away in these holy waters. For years, Hindus have declared that there is nothing quite as cleansing as the living waters of the River of Heaven. Nonetheless, the Ganges is still the purifying waters for the Hindus of India.

River Ganges draws all kinds of people and life seems to continually be bustling at its side. On the platforms and ghats are barbers cutting and trimming hair, and children flying their kites. You may see young men wrestling, exercising, or in deep meditation. Launderers are beating their clothes on stones at the edge. Multicolored saris and all sorts of wet clothes are laid out to dry in the sunshine. A boy might be washing his dog while a mother is taking her yelling child into the Ganges for the first time.

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However, here was my take of the river and its surroundings having experienced them firsthand. Mind you, I was a bit cynical and skeptical as you might have already guessed. I must apologize beforehand since it was impossible to relate my memories and thoughts in a clean manner. That was because the Ganges at Banaras was a wide, shallow, and horribly polluted cesspool; and that description captured the true condition of the river. (Cesspool must be French for toilet.) The seasonal rains helped cleanse it somewhat, but it was still terribly disgusting and filthy. It was an open sewer without the pretense of manhole covers. I suspected the River Styx would score much higher marks from the EPA.

As Chester had mentioned, people, both ritualistically and unceremoniously, bathed their bodies and clothes in the river's sacred waters. Cleansing and purifying would be the last words that would come to mind regarding the Ganges. Some of the worst waterborne diseases imaginable also abundantly resided in its waters and along its banks: dysentery, hepatitis, and cholera were the better known and more pronounceable ones.

Ghats are steps or stairs or wide landings. In this case, they were very broad steps that led from the upper ground level down to the water of the Ganges. Houses, shops, crematoria, temples, and small open plots of ground lined the river. In Banaras, the ghats often served as open-air auditoria where the devout congregated. There, religious devotees of Lord Vishnu or Krishna or Shiva would gather to pray, chant and light incense. In contrast, the crematoria were gathering places where religious devotees of Lord Vishnu or Krishna or Shiva would pray, chant, and light the bodies of deceased relatives. In the city of Banaras, enlightenment was a popular virtue given the large number of open-air crematoria and the whole place stank of burning flesh and death.

Speaking of bonfires of the vanities, elder sons usually carried out the task of arranging for the cremation of a parent. It was a respected and expected duty one must fulfill as part of the Hindu faith. As a relative, especially a son, you couldn't shirk the responsibility for all the rice in India. There were variations on the theme though. Widows sometimes committed sati or self-immolation on a dead husband's funeral pyre. However, this custom shouldn't be confused with the practice where a young wife of an elder son would accidentally be set afire by his angry parents. That act didn't count as a bona-fide religious practice.

Kali and I had to discreetly reconnoiter our target. I think that was French for reconnaissance which was French for the English phrase to take a look. The act sounded much more important and elegant when spoken in a foreign tongue, despite being French. That meant we would play rude, American tourists to get a closer peek at the crematorium. That was important because later I planned to enter the place playing a credible, undercover role to fool the bad guys. At least I hoped it would be credible for my sake.

We had arranged for a guide to take us to the city's famous waterfront ghats and on to the crematoria lining the river's banks. His name was Puneet and he was born and raised in Banaras. He told us he never wanted to leave the place alive or in one piece and I didn't doubt his sincerity one bit. He hired a boat and we slowly paddled down the Ganges for a mile or so. Puneet prayed at sunset and dipped his fingers into the river to taste its holy powers. He was a true believer who claimed he'd never come down with a case of Delhi-belly. I believed him as we were in Banaras at the moment and I suspected Banaras-belly to be a much worse fate.

As it was sunset, the sun appeared as a magnificent reddish-orange orb in the lower sky. We took a photo to prove I had been

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on planet Earth while I was away. I'd need it later to support my expense report. Proper documentation was everything in DS since the organization looked for everything under the sun to find error and fault. I was never a favored son as you might have already guessed.

We approached the most famous and largest open-air crematorium in the city. Its name was the Manikarnika, named after the ghat it occupied. It was our target, the place where Kris Amar worked and lived. We anchored about 25 yards off-shore and watched a most unusual religious custom. We witnessed a number of bodies burning on pyres on the structure's three graduated tiers.

Manikarnika hosted up to up to 200 cremations each day and the whole and holy process was efficient and businesslike. Above the ghats were huge stacks of wood; the family of the deceased, according to their means, bought one of the many funeral packages offered, including a certain quantity of firewood, sandalwood, sawdust, ghee, other ritualistic paraphernalia, and a priest's services. Dalit attendants set up the pyre, the body was placed on it, the priest chanted and performed the rituals, ghee (a butter and oil concoction) was poured on, and the pyre was set alight as the men of the family watched. Women were not permitted to be anywhere close to the body and it wasn't anything personal. It was just normal, male-dominated Hindu custom and discrimination and nothing more.

If the fire didn't catch-on well, more ghee and sawdust were added. If a family couldn't afford enough firewood, the body's torso was burned first, while the head and legs stuck out to be deftly pushed in by a pole after the middle part collapsed. The Dalits, who tended the fires and the bodies made sure that things were burned to a crisp and the resulting smells were offal.

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A few hours later, a portion of the ashes and bits of bone would be gathered by the eldest son or a senior male of the family and consigned to the waters. There, Dalit scavengers would stand with wire nets to dredge up the ash and mud, hoping to find a gold tooth or nose ring that might have survived the fire. We were almost hit a couple of times by these little offerings tied up in small cloth sacks. Puneet said the deceased's remaining ashes would be taken home by the family and mourned for a period of time before being tossed into the Ganges for all of eternity.

Hindu scriptures decreed that humans, with certain exceptions, must be cremated or their souls could not be released from the mortal world. They could not be reincarnated and would remain in a state of perpetual limbo for eternity or in perpetuity; whichever was the longer timeout period in the cosmic penalty box.

Not all who died were cremated. For example, children under five, lepers, pregnant women, and snakebite victims were offered directly to the river. Bloating bodies could occasionally be seen floating on its waters. The remains eventually sank to the bottom as the body's gases were slowly expelled. It was a deflating experience for those mortals who watched the scene since people knew their turns were coming. However, they believed there would be a perpetual life-preserver to help them survive their journey down Mother Ganges. To them, it was simply a matter of faith that involved a certain amount of spiritual buoyancy.

The Dalits were the lowest class in the Indian caste system. Technically, that wasn't true. They were so low on the totem pole that they were not even invited to the cast party. Even the untouchables refused to touch them. They even fell well—below the social standing of the pariahs who scavenged night soil for a living.

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The Indo-Aryan root-word for Dalit meant “held under check”, “suppressed”, “crushed”, or in a looser sense, “oppressed”. It was simply the latest pejorative term for an outcaste in Hindu society. However, not all Dalits lived in India. Not surprisingly, many resided in the adjoining nations of Bangladesh and Pakistan. For example, there were 1.4 million ethnic Hindu minorities living in predominately Muslim Pakistan and sixty percent of them were Dalits.

Traditionally, Dalits were not allowed to let their shadows fall upon a non-Dalit caste member and they were required to sweep the ground where they walked to remove the contamination from their footfalls. Dalits were forbidden to worship in the same temples or draw water from the same wells as caste Hindus. They typically lived in segregated neighborhoods outside the main villages. They were relegated to the most disgusting, menial jobs in Indian society. The Dalits were the country’s scavengers, latrine and sewer cleaners, and removers and renderers of dead animals. Virtually every shitty, demeaning job that existed in India would be performed by a Dalit. It was simply an expected obligation and duty. Not to cast dispersions, but that was their predetermined lot in this present life.

While Puneet continued to inform us of the Dalits and their lot in this life, I flipped a spent cigarette into the water. It bobbed a couple of times before sinking into the river. My DNA had just conjoined with multitudes of Hindu believers and I was now one with the universe.

Given their lack of status, Dalits were also employed in the cremation trade. They arranged for the firewood, tended to the pyres, and cleaned up the ashes afterwards. In the Hindu religion, engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the person performing them. The pollution was considered to be

contagious and therefore they were avoided by other Hindus: shunned, untouchable outcastes. An estimated 40 million people in India, most of them Dalits, were bonded workers with many working in slave-like conditions to pay off debts that were incurred generations ago. While overt discrimination against them had diminished over time, they still remained at the very bottom of the Hindu barrel.

I had seen and heard enough. We covertly snapped a few photos of the crematorium and adjacent buildings to help us later. It was getting late and I was getting hungry so we headed back to our hotel. As we paddled back to the dock, Puneet gave us small candles wrapped in aluminum foil shaped like tiny boats. We floated them for peace, prosperity, and good luck. More of the Hindu enlightenment stuff, I suspected. The river was filled with these twinkling lights and it was an unusual, eerie sight given the backdrop of the crematorium and its raging funeral pyres. Whatever floated your boat, I guessed.

I was sorry to report that I didn't float so well since I wasn't especially buoyant, either spiritually or physically. While stepping out of the boat, I slipped and fell into the water. Kali politely put a hand over her mouth while furiously snapping pictures with her digital camera. Good God, I had just made the cover of the DS Special Agent Association's quarterly newsletter. But it would be a watered-down version of me this time.

Mr. Puneet was laughing his butt off and joked that I'd now been properly baptized in the name of Mother Ganges. I didn't appreciate his Brahman bull one bit.

I was helped out of the drink by several friendly natives. The peer pressure must have been enormous because I was quickly extracted from the water. At that point, I was freaked out of my freaking mind and ran like a madman through the mass of

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humanity to our awaiting car. I took three vigorous, successive showers at the hotel. While they helped a little, Kali still refused to sleep with me.

She teased that she felt unclean and unworthy in my presence and maybe she had a point. I knew about the dysentery, hepatitis and cholera stuff. However, I worried that the river was also infested with cooties or the heebie-jeebies or something worse out of a Stephen King novel. In any case, I felt bedbugs crawling all over my body, even though I had left the night light on. I pulled my comforter over my head and finally drifted-off to vivid nightmares.

Sometimes those who served and protected had a burning desire to avoid those indignities usually suffered by lesser mortals.

Chapter 11

Dickering over Dick's Worth

The local IB agents interviewed Singh Singh's mother, brothers, and sister. Nothing came of the interviews, especially with the elderly Mrs. Singh unless you counted her constant drooling. She spoke volumes in that regard. As usual, around-the-clock physical surveillance and phone taps were instituted for all parties concerned.

Uncle Amar, the head ghoul of the crematorium, was another matter altogether. He deserved special attention and he would get it in spades if Kali McAlister had anything to say about it. She was wound-tight and couldn't wait to bust some bad guys' chops or legs.

Chester reported back on the results of the passenger manifest checks for Joe Singh. IB agents had confirmed that Joe was booked on Indian Air flights, both to and from Kabul, Afghanistan, for the dates in question. Oh God, say it ain't so Joe, I thought. Afghanistan in early 2001 was not Indian Territory; it belonged to the Taliban and their al-Qaida masters.

Joe Singh had undergone military training in Afghanistan for those three missing months and had become a trained terrorist zealot of one stripe or another. Whichever stripe, it suggested that he was affiliated with a group or organization friendly with Islamic extremists. Jihad was his goal and terrorism was the means to that end. That wasn't a good thing for Uncle Sam or Zeenat and Alicia.

Chester, Kali and I put on our thinking caps. We actually were wearing our DS ball caps with the organization's gold shield and

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wore them backward for better perspective. We had to come up with a game plan to clandestinely get inside the crematorium to snoop around. Kris Amar was our link to the girls' whereabouts. They wouldn't be far from his grasp since they were much too valuable prizes to entrust to others.

We carefully prepared for our adventure since getting into the Manikarnika crematorium undetected would be difficult. Getting out alive might be more difficult. This was an audacious and dangerous mission even by DS standards. I meant the dangerous part. Audaciousness was much easier for the outfit to achieve. We didn't have much time to prepare and time was of the essence. After all, lives and careers were at stake for some.

I shaved every bit of hair from my body. Kali helped, and I think she got-off on the chore. I was totally bald and could see myself ten years hence. After I removed my watch and ring, I was naked as a Jaybird at birth. I then smeared shoe polish all over my body and covered every crack, crease, and crevasse. We had to get the color just right to pull-off the guise successfully. Regrettably, our problem was that we didn't know shit from Shinola. We'd learn quickly enough though. We experimented by mixing brown and cordovan together until we got the desired shade. I now looked India Indian from head to toe.

While I was putting on my makeup, Chester was leaving to meet with Kris Amar to arrange for my cremation later in the evening. That was what a loving son did for his deceased father. I was to end up as another crispy critter in this never-ending cycle of life, death, life, etc., etc.,—ad nauseous.

We had enlisted Puneet's help in our little ritual since he knew the area and people around the crematorium like the back-of-his-hand. I hoped he wouldn't betray us in a back or underhanded

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manner though. He was an important player in our upcoming drama and we had to trust him with our lives.

I was laid to rest in the bed of a Tata Ace truck, much like the one used to kidnap the girls. Irony was sometimes coincidentally ironic in this biz. I wore only a loincloth and covered from head to foot in a gold sheet. It was a cheap cotton one because I was running low on Uncle Sam's money. Garlands of marigolds were strewn over my body. The litter that was carrying my mortal remains was festooned with sticks of burning incense. That worried me because I could be prematurely cremated without solving the case and that would burn me up for sure.

Puneet had arranged for bearers to carry my litter into the crematorium. Unfortunately, these were the pall variety; not the gun types. My son, Chester, dutifully walked at my side. As moving as the ceremony was, I didn't think anyone here would mourn my passing. My litter was gently and respectfully placed just outside Kris Amar's office on the second floor of the building. I was close enough to hear the conversation he was having with Chester about the funeral arrangements.

Chester was offered tea and the two of them seemed to be getting-on well. They talked about the weather and the latest cricket matches held in Banaras. It was all very sociable by the sounds of it. I didn't want to be a sticky wicket, but I sure wished they'd get down to brass tacks. I felt a little bit claustrophobic with the sheet over my face. However, the cloth was of such coarse weave and poor quality that I could easily make out shapes and figures.

Sometimes parsimony was a virtue for those who served and protected.

The two finally started talking turkey. I thought that was a rude way to discuss my self-worth, but I kept my mouth shut. Kris

asked how and when I died, how old I was, and what I weighed. Chester replied that I had died late last night after a very brief, sudden illness.

“Was his illness contagious?” Kris inquired.

“No, not at all,” Chester responded. “He suffered from a sudden and accidental case of anal-cranial inversion. He simply couldn’t pullout in time and was asphyxiated.”

“Our family always said he had a big head,” Chester mentioned in sotto voce, but still loud enough for me to hear. “He died a painfully embarrassing death at his own hands. It wasn’t a case of suicide because he often had his head up his ass.”

“However, the coroner declared it an act of autoeroticism because it happened while he was listening to the radio while sitting in his Toyota. Tragically, he had a repetitive motion sickness that he just couldn’t lick,” he smugly added. I could tell he enjoyed this little conversation at my funeral expense.

What an ungrateful child, I thought. I would bitch slap him later for his insolence. What was with kids these days? There was no respect for their elders or betters anymore. I’d be damned careful about who I sired in the future.

Kris muttered his condolences and agreed that it was a horrible way to die. He then asked if the family would be making a donation to the local AA chapter in my name.

Chester said it wasn’t likely because there were already too many anonymous assholes in India. Kris vigorously nodded in agreement.

Chester reported that I weighed 175 pounds, but quickly amended the number to 155. Jesus, he was trying to drive the price down of my immolation! He was demanding a fire-sale and I was fuming. Kris ignored his whining and converted my pounds into kilos so he could gauge the amount of firewood needed to kindle

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me. They continued to haggle over the cost for a while. Chester was a shrewd bargainer. Chester even asked if he could pay the bill with his Discover card so he could score some travel points. But Kris said no. He commented that cremation was a cash only business and the only credit one could get was in the afterlife. Damn, Chester was always looking for an angle at my expense.

Seasoned oak was the preferred material because it burned hot and true. If the price was too high, Kris said he could whittle it down by using poplar, although it wasn't a particularly popular fuel source because of its inferior burn quality. It would take more wood and stretch-out the process by at least a half hour. Chester insisted on using the cheaper wood. He said I wouldn't mind. It was obvious I was going to be poplar. Chester had saved Uncle Sam \$6.32 by my quick calculation.

Sometimes those who served and protected objected to doing a slow burn at someone else's expense.

I caught a shadow moving in my direction. It was Kris. He pulled off my golden sheet and I kept perfectly still. He placed a pocket mirror under my nose and I held my breath. I was good at the practice having worried so many years about the postings of the annual Foreign Service promotion list. I also stifled a scream when he pinched my testicles. He recovered me and turned to Chester.

"I can see your father wasn't well-endowed at the time of his death," Kris commented as he continued to scribble notes on a pad of paper.

Chester looked puzzled and countered by saying "Oh no, that's not true. He was financially well-off from his many years in the night soil business. He had cornered the market for crap in India and sold it abroad as high-grade fertilizer for a tidy profit. He

really had his shit together as a businessman, except he was just wrongheaded much of the time.”

I was proud of Chester for defending my honor and the family name. However, I wished they'd hurry up and finish since I was already exhausted from playing dead.

They continued to argue about the funeral costs and arrangements for my cremation, but they finally struck an agreement. I'd be immolated for \$114.11 and paid in Rupees, of course, since nobody wanted to be stuck with U.S. dollars anymore. Chester left the room to pray at the body of his deceased father. He lit a stick of incense and said some mumbo-jumbo over my body; he was simply being a respectful son. Maybe I wouldn't disown him after all. Inheriting the family business and fortune would keep him in line. That, and the fact that only I could approve his expense voucher, I thought.

While I was being prayed over, I slid the sheet down a bit from my face and watched Kris Amar take two small jars from the shelf behind him. He tapped out grayish-white powder from one container and a pure white substance from the other. He mixed the two together on the desk in front of him and then put a long straw to his nose and snorted the mixture. He rubbed his nostrils after his second hit. This guy was a total creep and druggie. He was snorting the cremains of the deceased along with some horse or coke. I couldn't be sure which, but he was one very sick dude in any case. I wondered if it were one of his little rituals to enhance his immortality. He obviously took this death and life stuff very seriously; perhaps even as a life and death matter.

Kris slumped back into his chair and put his feet up on his desk. He was now kicked-back, laid-back, mellowed-out, and fucked-up and that would help our plan of action. His little escape from reality would make it easier for me to search the building for

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the girls. Chester would hang around Kris's office and keep an eye on him while I explored the crematorium.

As I got up from the litter, my Smith Sixty revolver dropped to the floor with a loud bang. (Sorry, I meant to say with a thud.) It had been secreted beneath the small of my back and my kidneys thanked me for the kindness. However, the sound was loud enough to wake up the dead. Even Kris in his lethargic state looked around the room and then dozed off again. That was a close call. Next time I'd remember to bring one with a silencer.

I got up and tucked Ms. Smith down my loincloth. If I passed anyone in the corridor, I would put both my arms straight out in front of me and stiffly walk with my eyes glazed over. I thought my zombie routine would be especially effective here. I didn't think anyone would give me a second thought or glance. I strapped a miner's flashlight on my forehead. In retrospect, the third-eye stuff did come in handy. I walked down a flight of stairs to the basement where I was greeted by an ancient labyrinth of hallways and rooms. I would start my search at the bottom of the building and work my way up; just like in my DS career. I only wished for better luck in my current quest and ascension.

The place seemed to be deserted, with most of the action seemingly taking place outside by the campfires. The marshmallow and weenie vendors must make a killing off these celebrations. I wondered if there were franchises located throughout the country. Cremation appeared to be a good business, but it still could be exploited for greater profit. The perfect business model could be found in the movie *Soylent Green*. It was an ideal recycling process that combined both nutrition and religious observance.

I turned a corner and came face-to-face with a large, open room. At its center was a machine about eight feet high by five

feet wide. It resembled one of the x-ray devices at an airport, but much larger. I took a closer look. A placard on the side of the machine announced that it was a Power-Pak II Cremator manufactured by Matthews Cremation, a division of Matthews International Corporation. It boasted that it was the fastest cremator in its class and capable of incinerating up to four bodies in an eight-hour period. Jesus, that was double the speed of the pyre, I realized. The unit was equipped with a hydraulic loading table and a Smoke-Buster 140 feature that eliminated smoke and odors from the cremation process. It was the latest and greatest machine in this dying industry.

I was impressed that Kris Amar was looking to the future. Firewood was getting scarce and expensive. The cost of electric or gas cremation was considerably less expensive than the funeral pyre method. The machine was the new kid on the block and would eventually replace the traditional method over time. However, it was extremely difficult to snuff-out customs, rituals, and religious observations in India because such things tended to die hard.

As I finished reading the literature, I looked up and saw a gun directly aimed at my face. I didn't have time to ask questions and instinctively reacted to the rude gesture by quickly sweeping it aside with my left arm. With my right hand, I drew my Smith and fired. As I pulled the trigger, I yelled fore as was proper etiquette under the circumstances. After all, I was a member of a diplomatic security service and required to always comport myself accordingly.

I aimed for the center of his chest and he was dead about the time his body reached the floor. A second shot wasn't necessary. I'd hit him with a 110 grain, hydra-shock, hollow-point slug from my .357 magnum revolver. The round tore him up and down

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inside and, as advertised and intended, tore him a new one, as Chester might quip. Regardless, another Injun had just bitten the dust, as I might have said.

Respectfulness and thoughtfulness were traits that were always in vogue for true diplomats. Those always went well with the surf and turf dinners after such memorable events. I took my Sharpie and a deposit slip from my checkbook and wrote a heartfelt note. It was the least I could do under the circumstances. However, I was confused as to how I should address it—Dear God, Lord Shiva, Allah, or Buddha? What if he were an atheist? They didn't instruct us on the proper etiquette for such things in basic agents training. I decided to take a safe, neutral position so I wouldn't offend anyone I might meet in an afterlife. I liked to hedge my bets and souls.

To whoever it may concern, I wrote in a clear hand. Please accept the soul, spirit, or essence of this miserable Thug assassin. I didn't know his name since we didn't have time for a proper introduction. I'm sure he harbored no animus toward me and was just following orders. I'm also certain there was nothing personal when he planned to blow my fucking brains out in a creepy crematorium in Banaras, India. Thankfully, he was unsuccessful in his endeavor and that should count for something, I guess.

Speaking of counting, could I get bonus points in your book by eliminating a naughty person from this side of the opaque veil? Do you have any clout with St. Peter? I firmly believe I should get extra credits since I'm hoping I can offset some of my youthful indiscretions. In any case, Big Guy, please accept my gift for what he's worth. Sincerely yours, your pal, Dick.

P.S.—I'm leaving my pen stuck in his chest wound just in case you want to write me back. Don't worry about paying me back anytime soon. I think I can voucher off the Sharpie on my next

expense report if I make it out of here alive. And for God's sake, please ignore my penmanship! I'm under a little stress here so also forgive me for any misspellings.

I loaded my would-be assassin's body onto the cremator's conveyer belt, flipped the switch, and watched the door to the unit open to accept his body. The door automatically closed and I heard the whoosh of the gas burners. The unit really worked as touted and I was impressed with its efficiency. I'd have to write a thank-you note to Matthews after I returned home. I might even score a promotional gig from the company to pimp its product. I also could be a poster child for their magnificent machine, if they'd let me. But I wasn't going to wait around for a final endorsement though because I had to move on and up.

Sometimes those who served and protected could be savvy entrepreneurs who also needed to get their ashes hauled occasionally.

I finished my search of the basement and moved up the stairs. I would go to the top floor of the building this time and work my way down; the walk would do me good. However, I was still conflicted about the assassin's death. The killing part was no problem, but I wondered if he would have preferred a funeral pyre instead, but I didn't know if he were a high or low tech sort of guy. No matter, it was the thought and end result that counted. He could seek his revenge in his next life with whom or what I became in my reincarnated soul/mind/spirit/body. It was all too damn confusing for me to think about now. All this religious stuff really blew my mind.

I heard gunshots ring out as I reached the top of the stairs. There was some yelling and a lot of scurrying movement and noise. I took cover in an empty room and waited until things settled down. When I checked the hallway, I saw Chester lying on

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the floor. He was conscious, but bleeding from his leg. I tended to him and asked what had just happened. He told me he had followed Kris Amar to the room at the end of the hall. As Kris started to unlock the door, he spotted Chester and opened fire.

Chester said he didn't even have a chance to get his gun out of its holster to return fire because things simply happened too fast for him to react. He next saw Kris and a cohort push and pull Alicia and Zeenat through the hall in the opposite direction. I immediately ran down the hallway and quickly descended the staircase. Kris and the girls were nowhere to be found and they had disappeared into the night. We reluctantly regrouped with our tails tucked tightly between our legs.

Sometimes those who served and protected got so damned close, but still couldn't grab the cigar or brass ring.

Chapter 12

Regrouping Our Groping

Two IB agents were killed and one was wounded in the shootout with Kris and his cronies as they escaped from the crematorium. One of the bad guys might have been wounded as well. Fortunately, Chester had only suffered a minor flesh wound to his game leg and he was up and limping again in no time. The Indian authorities immediately issued an All-Points Bulletin for Kris—an APB, for short, in the cop biz. It was similar to a BOLO or Be on the Lookout, but had fewer letters in its contracted form. Therefore, it was an abbreviated, time-saver for the cops in matters where time was of the essence. Kris Amar's Dalit coworkers at the crematorium were strenuously interviewed by the IB agents. Not surprisingly, none had anything to say about Kris, either good or bad. To have done so, and to cooperate with the authorities, would have meant death to them and their families.

Mum was the word in these matters. By the way, that doesn't refer to flowers or mothers. No one would come forward fearing for their own or a loved one's life. It wasn't considered good karma or commonsensical under the circumstances. Despite all of the hype about reincarnation, most people still wanted to live a bit longer in their present skins. Their next ride on the cosmic merry-go-round might not be as pleasant. Apparently, the Hindu gods and goddesses made a list and checked it twice for those naughty and nice.

I briefed the ambassador and key members of the embassy's country team on the failed operation in Banaras. I thought he

might declare me persona non grata and send me packing, but he didn't. And if he didn't, Jersey and DS would never question his decision to let me stay. Speaking of Jersey, I owed him a report on the latest case developments. Ordinarily, I'd draft a message to him over lunch, but I'd wait a bit longer to see if I could give him some good news too.

Sometimes those who served and protected preferred eating chicken to crow.

I spent the next hour or so alone in the task force room. I was trying to make sense of things and develop a Plan Two. The first one hadn't exactly gone by the number, but I would try again. However, there were some things that had become clear and they started to fill in the picture. Luckily, we also painted by numbers in the department. I was convinced that Joe Singh and Kris Amar were both Muslim, mujahedeen warriors engaged in Jihad against the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and, by extension, the United States.

Both would be philosophically, religiously, and politically aligned with the Taliban and al-Qaida. Joe was born in the Punjab, the portion that was predominately Muslim and now part of Pakistan. I suspected that Kris Amar hailed from the same area and was of the same faith. They were both educated Dalits who must have seethed with resentment over their treatment, and that of their fellow Dalits, in the rigid Indian social structure where they were considered the lowest-of-the-low. They must have realized the irony of the situation. Their fates were the result of an accident of birth or rebirth, if you prefer. They each had drawn the joker from the cosmic deck of cards. It was bad karma in spades. I also suspected they had something else in common, but I couldn't prove it yet. I assigned Chester to work that bent angle.

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The kidnapping of the two girls couldn't have been a better choice in order to pressure the United States and Afghanistan. My guess was that Joe, at the urging of Uncle Kris, infiltrated the embassy and bided his time while identifying a high-value kidnap target. He insinuated himself as an affable, competent employee of Uncle Sam. He then maneuvered into driving for the ambassador's family when the opportunity arose. These guys were patient and cunning. It was possible that Ambassador Thurman might have been their initial target, except that he was too well-guarded.

Alicia then became a target of opportunity for the gang. Zeenat was a windfall bonus for the extortionists and Joe had somehow learned her true identity. Someone must have inadvertently leaked the fact she was the eldest daughter of the President of Afghanistan. The pickings didn't get any better or riper for the bad guys. They then ruthlessly stalked and ran their prey to ground. The trap was sprung and it was a "that's all she wrote" moment, to put the incident into better linguistic perspective.

I received a classified, eyes-only, cable from Jersey Briggs. He said the pressure from the seventh floor suits was intense and unrelenting. Besides the Secretary, the Black and senior Gray Dragons were demanding answers and results. The White House and the Hill were also relentless in their insistence that the department do something, and do it fast. They were feeling the international political heat and had to get out of the kitchen in a hurry.

It had been nine days since the kidnapping and the seniors in the building were already looking for scalps. Jersey desperately wanted to keep his hair intact, along with his career. I wasn't looking to become a skinhead either. Like a lava flow, the brown stuff was already heading on a downhill trajectory. I had to watch

my step, otherwise I'd end up going with the flow. Washington didn't have much patience and that meant I didn't have much time.

I cabled Jersey and told him I would have the case solved in 72 hours. I didn't weasel-word the claim. Of course, I didn't say I'd bring back the captives alive, just that I'd solve the case. I had plenty of wiggle room to work with if I didn't deliver on my promise. Words were malleable in the Foreign Service, but you could still get hit over the head with them anytime.

However, the statement would buy me an extra three days on the department's payroll before I was fired. Well, maybe something was better than nothing, I rationalized. And "Time is money," as the department adage went. The organization obviously had too much time on its hands if it could afford to sit around and think up these little inanities. Regardless, maybe I'd made a rash promise to deliver the goods. Only time would tell.

Sometimes those who served and protected enjoyed using clichés and trite expressions when other, more erudite, phrases eluded them.

I had enough time to walk to my hotel for lunch before I met with my task force. The embassy cafeteria fare was getting stale since I couldn't get a real cheeseburger to save my soul. The Indians must have some religious thing against eating American cheese. Where's the beef? I asked myself. As a true patriot, I took it as a personal slight and a slap in the face of Ms. America. But I didn't make any sexist remarks about her just in case her Uncle Sam was listening.

As I turned a corner, my world was turned upside down. I was grabbed from behind and pulled into a hedge of bushes next to the sidewalk. I couldn't see my attacker, but he was strong. The scarf he had placed around my neck was tight and I had to struggle to catch my breath. He pulled me to the ground and continued to

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tighten the noose. I was getting woozy and didn't know if I could remain conscious much longer. I had to think and act fast to save myself from being garroted to death. It was an obvious Thug assassination attempt. I hoped it would only stay an attempt and not become anything more serious. But as an atheist, I didn't plan to be victimized by someone else's religious practices. Tolerance was one thing, but this act just wasn't Christian or kosher.

We continued to struggle, but I couldn't yell for help since my throat was tied up at the moment. By the way, I wasn't above asking for assistance when someone was choking the shit out of me. Pride wouldn't go before the fall. But I was already felled and I had no illusions of grandeur at the moment. I was up to my neck in trouble.

The attacker then put a hand over my face to smother me. Before passing out, I was able to give him a sharp elbow to his ribs. He yelled out in pain and loosened his grip on the noose. That was enough for me to catch a breath, get on my feet, and spin around to give him a swift kick to the groin. He wasn't wearing a cup and he howled in agony. Obviously, the guy had some balls. He then took off running down the crowded street and ducked into an alley.

I didn't bother chasing him because I knew I couldn't catch him. My lung capacity and endurance weren't what they used to be for some reason. I then lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. As I reflected on what had just happened, I removed my neck brace. It had been uncomfortable to wear, but turned out to be a lifesaving security precaution.

I had learned this trick from a former DS colleague early in my career. He had successfully worn one for many years in order to hold his head high in the department. I thought it might be useful against intentional strangulation by Indian Thugs and I guessed

right. Garroting and burking could be hazardous to one's health. The medical collar saved my neck and life and I would now, and forever, be indebted to god Asclepius, as well as Lords Shiva and Vishnu.

I didn't bother reporting the incident to the police. What could I tell them? I knew the attacker wasn't Kris Amar. However, I could confirm the assailant was a brown-skinned male with black hair and of average height and weight.

Officers, I think he was Indian, but I'm not sure about his caste or home address. Oh, and by the way, he was also a Thug. I know they don't exist anymore, but that was what he was. No, I haven't been drinking, your honor.

I couldn't tell the cops that whenever they were strangling me from behind they all looked the same to me, but that was the truth. If they put five suspects in a police line-up, I'd probably be able to identify all of them equally. Regardless, I simply couldn't discriminate since it was strictly forbidden by department regulation.

I sat at a table in the hotel restaurant with my back to the wall. I didn't sit there for protection or as a matter of good tradecraft. I sat there as an expression of where I was in terms of the investigation and my short employment with DS. I ordered a bowl of chicken soup since my throat was a little sore. I wasn't sure if it was caused by the Delhi pollution or if I were coming down with a cold. Regardless, I sipped the soup and it went down easily. I was pleased to say that I didn't choke on the small pieces of chicken.

Returning to the chancery, I placed the following words under the names and photos of Kris Amar and Joe Singh on the white board: Indian, Dalit, Muslim, Thug, Extremist, Jihadist, and Punjabi. These were the common denominators between the two main people involved in kidnapping Zeenat and Alicia. Indian was

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their nationality and Dalit was their Hindu caste or station in society. Muslim or Mohammedan was their nominal religion. Thug was their modern-day vocation and avocation as assassins belonging to the Thuggee cult. Extremist reflected their Islamic fundamentalist religious and political views. Jihadist indicated they were trained mujahedeen warriors. Punjabi identified them as people born in a conflicted, troubled region straddling India and Pakistan. Boy, these guys had a lot of handles and baggage to deal with, but then again, so did we. Moreover, time was on their side and not ours.

The phone in the corner of the room rang loudly and it startled us. We had never heard it ring before and weren't sure that it actually worked. We suddenly found out it did; vigorously and with alarm. Big Bird answered it and said the embassy operator was patching a call through to me and that was not good news. I suspected it was Jersey Briggs asking where he could fax my walking papers. I took the phone, disguised my voice, and said "hello," in a contralto pitch, just like we'd been taught in the department's communications security course.

"Never compromise your identity," we were constantly admonished in class. It could be a foreign intelligence officer, or an ex-wife, or a bill collector on the other end of the line. Worse, it could be a correspondent from a prominent news organization asking embarrassing questions about the department. "Don't give up the high ground and only back down as you have to," they reminded us. "Maintain plausible denial at all times" and "Always accentuate the positive," were other memorable precautions. "Never take any wooden nickels," puzzled us, but we appreciated the two plus cents worth just the same. I could provide more of these sage pieces of wisdom, but I was concerned it was Jersey

and that he might hang-up before I could genuflect, but it wasn't a video phone so it would have been the thought that counted.

"You must be a Hindu at heart, if not at soul, Dick, because you have more incarnations than a guru," the voice spoke. I glanced at my jacket lapel to make sure I'd stayed mum. I had, it was a red one, so I was confused by what he had said about flowers. It sounded like more of the duality, duplicitous, double-speak stuff I had heard since arriving in India. The caller certainly wasn't Jersey since the speaker's English was much too good. He had a more pleasant accent than Jersey too. However, I wasn't interested in subscribing to The Times of India or learning how to make extra money in my spare time. That was because I didn't have any spare time and I was prohibited from reading foreign classifieds. I had to quickly blow off the caller and get back to business. But before I could hang up, he began his sales pitch and I listened politely and intently.

"This is Amar. We met the other night under awkward circumstances. Too bad you left empty-handed," he chided. "The girls are safe, but won't stay that way much longer if your government doesn't play ball and agree to our demands."

I was impressed by his Americanized gamesmanship. In his own twisted, demented way, maybe this guy was a straight-hitter, so I'd hear him out. I scribbled a note telling Big Bird to trace the call. Kris was likely using a throw-away cell phone that couldn't be traced, but we had to give it try. Our testimony at the department's upcoming ARB would look good on this point. We would use all the pointers we could possibly get to defend ourselves.

"Mr. Avery, I have an offer you can't refuse," he continued. By the sounds of that statement, I would have to add the words

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Italian and Mafia to the white board. These guys were much too worldly and wordy.

“I’m prepared not to kill Alicia Thurman if the following conditions are fully met. First, you will instruct the Afghan government to release two prisoners of war being held in Kandahar, Afghanistan. These men are brave mujahedeen warriors who have served the cause of freedom for many years—this point is not negotiable, Mr. Avery. They are to be taken to the Pakistan border and released unharmed. They will swear on the Koran that they will no longer participate in Jihad. They will no longer take up arms in the name of Allah and here are their names.”

“Hold on, wait a sec, I need to grab a pen,” I authoritatively told him. “Ok, shoot, I mean go ahead and give me the two names,” I quickly corrected myself.

He did and I wrote them down on a small, yellow Post-It note. I asked whether the names were phonetic or literal spellings. He told me he didn’t have time to give an ignorant infidel a primer on the Sanskrit, Arabic, and Indo-Aryan alphabets. I thought he was rude and I didn’t like his haughty attitude. Only ugly American tourists traveling abroad are permitted to act that way, I mused. Ok, I guessed that Mohammed Kabul, the blind camel dealer, and Mohammed Mohammed, the ever-hopeful eunuch, would be easy enough to locate at the only joint POW holding-facility in Kandahar.

“As to the second demand, it is equally important,” he continued. “It is a videotape of our leaders explaining to the world why Jihad is a necessary and inevitable evil. If it’s Allah’s will, war will continue for a millennium to drive the infidels and their lackeys from the Middle East and South Asia. It is Allah’s vision and command to the faithful. This is the dawning of the new crusade where Islamic true believers will smite the nonbelievers.

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Millions will die if they do not renounce their heathen religious beliefs and convert to Islam—the true faith of Allah."

"The tape will be shown to the American and Canadian public on all major television channels immediately following the airing of American Idol. To give the tape stature, it will be labeled as a public service announcement from the United States government, like the Smokey the Bear commercials—only YOU (fucking infidels) can prevent Armageddon! Your president will introduce the film noir while eating a shawarma sandwich in the Oval Office. As the tape is being aired in North America, it will simultaneously be shown on Al Jazeera television to the Arab-speaking world—inshalla, Allah Akbar—."

I interrupted his spiel and politely informed him that Smokey was an American icon whose image and persona had been copyright protected many years before. As to the president, I explained the SAG rules and the concept of residuals. He replied that he didn't care about technical problems. Moreover, he mentioned that there was no indication that Smokey or the president had converted to Islam so they wouldn't get any special treatment. We Americans would just have to bear and grin it with both actors. We would have to work out the details or there was no deal. Alicia Thurman would die a horrible death at his hands.

I warned him not to harm either of the girls or the wrath of Richard Avery and the United States of America would come down hard on him and his cohorts. I said that Uncle Sam was a wimp compared to me, so he'd better watch out, he'd better not cry, he'd better not pout, because I was telling him why—Richard Avery was coming to town! I also told him I could out-smite him any day of the week with one arm tied behind my back. Like the word smitten, I didn't know what smite meant. Foreign words really confused me. He laughed at my false bravado and

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blustering. My feelings were hurt as a result and I snuffled a bit before regaining my composure.

“Amar, you know as well as I do that I can’t agree to these things. They have to be run up the flagpole in Washington.”

After I explained what that phrase meant to the ignorant foreigner, I demanded some proof of life. I had to know if the girls were alive and kicking, so to speak.

“Put Alicia Thurman on the line,” I demanded. I waited about 30 seconds before a young female voice tentatively said hello.

I said hi back to keep the conversation brief. I told Alicia my name was Richard Avery and that I was a special agent with the Diplomatic Security Service, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Department of State, United States of America. I hoped she’d be impressed and relieved that she was now talking to a government trained professional. The cavalry was coming and I was leading the charge. I wondered if I said Calvary, not cavalry. I badly wanted to reassure her of her salvation, rather than her crucifixion. Maybe I should have said Calgary and made her believe I was a Canadian Mountie and about to rescue her. But that would have only worked if she were linguistically and geographically challenged. Regardless, she apparently didn’t quite see the situation the same way.

“Like, do you mean to say that the most powerful nation on the planet sent a dick to save me?” she incredulously asked.

I replied that was about it—in a nutshell.

Jesus fucking Christ! Those were the next words she explosively uttered.

Obviously, Alicia had a potty mouth and attitude. Maybe I shouldn’t be so conscientious in my work, I thought. I immediately chided myself. I was here to protect truth, justice and the American way, and a young woman with a filthy vocabulary. I

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was the good guy who needed money too. I would not waiver in my duty, despite her insightful slights.

“Alicia, I’m from the government and here to help you,” I boastfully declared. I believed that line might reassure her that I wasn’t just an ordinary, inept federal bureaucrat. I was a special one.

“Ok, Mr. Avery, but I’m, like, so frightened. I want to come home! I miss my parakeets, Frick and Frack, and my MTV,” she sobbed.

My heart went out to her at that point. I fully understood how important favorite TV programs were to Americans. I also understood her pain because I related well to teenage girls as long as they were of legal age.

“Are you and Zeenat okay?” I asked.

“Zeenat? Oh, do you mean the skinny Afghan chick? Yeah, Z-Bitch is doing fine, my man.”

It sounded like the two had been cooped up too long together. I then told Alicia to take the bubble gum out of her mouth because her annunciation wasn’t Topps.

“Have you and Zeenat been treated well?” I inquired.

“Like yeah, they let us watch Indian television and read the Koran too,” she said. “But, like, when we’re naughty or bad, they, like, torture us.”

I had worried about that possibility and anticipated they might have undergone the most degrading treatment at the hands of their captors.

“What did they do to you?” I asked, but wasn’t sure I wanted to hear her answer.

“Ok, well, like, the very nastiest thing they do is force us to listen to Don Ho’s greatest hits. They put earphones on our heads and we have to listen to his caterwauling for hours until we say

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we're sorry. Tiny Bubbles sucks after you listen to it for, like, a gazillion hours, ya know," she said. "However, when I finally say I'm sorry, I cross my fingers behind my back. I sometimes stick my tongue out at them too, if I'm really pissed," she enthusiastically noted.

Jesus, she was one tough, defiant young woman, I thought. Our nation's gumption and moral stock were in safe hands with this younger generation of patriots.

"Alicia, I'll tell your parents that you love them. That will go a long way to relieving their anxiety," I told her. "They've been terribly worried about you, as you can imagine," I added.

"Like sure, whatever, Dick Man," she said. "Just get me the hell out of this shithole."

I think I was warming up to her. She said she had to go; an Indian soap was on the tube that she really was, like, into, like, big-time.

I told her to put Kris Amar back on the phone. I warned him again not to harm the girls. He assured me that if I acted as an honest broker in the deal, no harm would come to them. However, if I crossed him, he said he would feed their flesh to the Ganges fish; one piece at a time while they were still alive.

I said I wanted one more piece of proof that the girls were alive and well. My superiors would demand it before agreeing to anything. I told him to have both girls stand in front of the phone and hold up a copy of today's newspaper. He should make sure the paper's date was clearly visible. I wanted proof positive that they were alive as of today to reassure my seniors. He agreed and confirmed that the girls were holding the newspaper in front of them as we spoke. Of course, I couldn't see anything, but I sure could intuit the picture because I was using a smart phone. I hoped that Kris couldn't pick up on my little faux pas or idiocy.

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“That should do,” I said. I thought I was developing some rapport with him. I also wanted to convey the strong message that he wasn’t screwing around with just anyone.

Kris tried to end the conversation, but not before I asked for a number or address where he could be reached. He told me not to worry and he’d be back in touch. He then hung up on me. I vowed to punish him later for his lack of phone etiquette. These rude foreigners really tended to push my decorum hot buttons.

Sometimes those who served and protected played hardball to safeguard America’s honor, womanhood, geopolitical interests, and telephone courtesies.

Chapter 13

Gandhi Dancing

I had been pulling the department's train for the past ten days and my back was getting sore. I needed a few hours rest and recreation to unwind my mind and muscles. I wasn't used to such heavy lifting in DS. Most of my career consisted of menial chores where I was expected to step and fetch things for my masters. Unfortunately, I had become very hunch-backed and servile as a result. However, I had learned the fine art of stooping to conquer. I was finally a bona fide federal bureaucrat in good stooping.

I finished a lengthy cable to the powers regarding my conversation with Kris Amar and awaited a response. I was certain Uncle Sam wouldn't agree to Kris's demands, but I couldn't tell Kris that. I needed to buy time to string things out a little longer. I was looking for an opportunity to turn the tables on the bad guys and rescue the girls. I wanted to be a real American hero and not the schmuck I had been most of my sketchy life. I would need some dumb luck and good karma to carry the day. I simply couldn't afford to dick things up for a change. Jeez, I suddenly realized that I'd have to change my name and fast.

The United States of America refused to negotiate with terrorists, plain and simple. It was a cardinal rule that was never to be broken. To do so would only encourage and perpetuate more terrorist acts. However, cardinal rules were sometimes bent by the government's soaring eagles. For example, they didn't necessarily object to families, or businesses, or kidnap/ransom insurers to pay the piper. They also didn't mind if discussions took place between

the extortionists and U.S. officials as long as they were not characterized as negotiations. Conversations were okay; negotiations were not.

In the end, it was all about perception, spin, and wordplay. It was also about plausible denial and staying safely outside the loop in case things went to shit. There were no better players in this confidence game than the federal bureaucrats. They not only knew how to play the game, but they also made up the rules as they went along. They were savvy grandmasters in parsing and packaging the truth. I thought these admirable traits might be useful in my plan of action and I looked to them for inspiration.

I had Chester beating the bushes at the site of my attack in the off-chance the cops had picked up any leads on the assailant. It was highly unlikely, but we were dead in the water as far as our investigation was concerned. I prayed the circumstances would be better for Alicia and Zeenat. Some hope, even a slight glimmer, would be welcomed by our team.

Kali was getting her hair and nails done in a beauty shop down the street from the chancery. She said she'd check with the manicurists to see if they knew of anything that might be helpful to our cause. She was a consummate professional, through-and-through. I was proud of her, except I had to break her disgusting habit of biting her nails. Despite being nominally nutritious, it was neurotic. It was also tough on my back, I selflessly thought.

A knock on the task force room door jolted me from my reverie. It was Big Bird and he was being a gentleman, as usual. He was old-school DS and I appreciated that fact. The younger agents simply didn't possess the panache or table manners of their elders. It was a shame that these time-honored values were being cast aside in the name of professionalism and goal achievement. I wasn't sure where our government was heading anymore. I

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certainly didn't fit into any mold that contained those words or attributes. My mold had been shaped and then shattered many years ago, just like my hopes and dreams. I was unique. Actually, I was a true red, white, and blue Dick and damn proud of it too.

I told Bird to come in. He asked how I was holding up. That was thoughtful of him and totally in character. I admitted that I was feeling the pressure and was a bit stressed at the moment. I mentioned that I'd try to get away from the chancery for a while to clear my head and chill before getting back into harness. He suggested some sightseeing to break out of my funk.

He'd arrange for an embassy driver to take me to some of the tourist sites in the city. I decided to take him up on his kind offer. My obsessive mind needed a mental break and my compulsive craving needed a cigarette. There was a certain synchronicity about those things that I appreciated in this depressing, addicting state of India that I was currently in. Desi-land was the appellation most used by the embassy staffers for the country. It was an apt reference all things considered. Regardless, I needed to jumpstart the investigation, solve the case, and get the hell out of here soonest, or earlier, if possible.

The driver dropped me at the front entrance to the Red Fort in Old Delhi and waited while I toured. As soon as I got out of the car, I was mobbed by street vendors and beggars. They were selling all sorts of gimcracks, thingamajigs, and whatchamacallits to the tourists. I used these words since I didn't know what to call such crap in Hindi or English. Some of the toys emitted strange noises and others flew through the air like whirligigs. I was being assaulted again, but this time by street kids.

I bought some noisemakers so the kids would leave me alone and pester someone else. Petit bribes were okay in this business and you could voucher the expenses too. You simply had to say

you couldn't remember where you had misplaced the receipts. Fraud was unacceptable in the department, but memory loss was not. It was a common affliction for those who traveled extensively abroad for Uncle Sam.

One boy, about eight or nine years old, asked if he could shine my shoes. What the hell, I thought. Why not? I could be a kind, generous, and thoughtful guy when my shoes needed to be cleaned by the downtrodden of this world.

I firmly put my foot down squarely on his makeshift shoeshine box. As he polished, I looked out across the courtyard at the mass of humanity. It was obvious that the Planned Parenthood Association needed to open a few more chapters in India, ASAP. However, the urchin's question startled me from the reveries populating my thoughts.

"Do you want me to scrape-off the gum from the bottoms of your shoes?" he hesitantly asked.

"No leave it there. It brings me good luck and surefootedness," I declared. "I need all the traction I can get these days," I archly added in support of my black wingtips. I didn't want to be caught flatfooted here.

"Mister, I bet I can tell you where you got your shoes," the ragamuffin declared.

I laughed to myself. Jesus, this was the oldest trick in the book. You could be in Nairobi, Shanghai or Timbuktu and the punch line to the little riddle would only change by geographic location. I decided to play along and bet him a couple of Marlboros he couldn't tell me where I got my shoes.

"Okay go ahead and tell me," I said, while smirking at his little scam. I already knew the answer. I got my shoes on the sidewalk in Old Delhi. Or, if I were in Nairobi, it would be the streets of Nairobi or whichever city in the world.

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“You got your shoes at the Brooks Brothers store in Washington,” he confidently said.

How did the little bastard know that? I pondered. I paid him for the shine and paid off my bet. I was pissed that I couldn't figure out how he knew where I bought my shoes at least until later when I took them off in my hotel room. The words “Brooks Brothers, Washington, DC” were clearly stamped on the leather soles.

Sometimes those who served and protected should be punished for sporting snobbish, self-publicizing footwear and underestimating the illiterates of this world.

I hired a guide and toured the Red Fort and his name was Naresh. He was a licensed tour guide and had numerous photo credentials hanging around his neck to prove it. He was not only official, but knowledgeable. He told me the Red Fort got its name from the massive walls of red sandstone that defined its four sides. The entire wall was 1.5 miles in length and averaged about 85 feet in height. This place had stature, I thought

It was built by the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan, as a new capital for his empire. Shah Jahan was the famous ruler who built the Taj Mahal in Agra in memory of his beloved wife. Naresh recounted the history of the fort up to the present time. He said the fort was completed in 1648 and occupied for the next 150 years by the descendants of Shah Jahan. At one point, more than 3,000 people lived within its walls. Sikh warriors seized the fort from its Muslim occupiers in 1783 and held it until 1857. That was when the British captured it following the Sepoy Mutiny. The British used it as a headquarters for the British Indian Army until India's independence in 1947.

I lit up a Marlboro and waited for Naresh to finish his canned spiel. I knew how the story ended. The Red Fort became a tourist

trap for unwary foreigners with enough money to pay his fees. However, I patiently waited for the bottom line.

I readily acknowledged that the architecture of the interior structures was interesting and the gardens were beautifully planted and groomed. The buildings and grounds were a world away from the crowded, dirty, and bustling streets outside the gates. I thanked and paid Naresh for his excellent service. He made the visit much more interesting by imparting his knowledge and insights of the historical site. I even decided to tip for a change.

I felt my mind already starting to relax and noticed that I wasn't gripping my cigarettes as firmly as before. That was a good sign, but not a lucky one, since I smoked only Marlboros. Regardless, there was nothing more uplifting than hearing about 300-plus years of bloody warfare. It made one more humble by putting things into better perspective.

I could see clearly now, but I couldn't discern shapes, colors or intentions too well. I also worried about my peripheral vision. I was still having some difficulty peeking around corners. No matter, my hindsight was always one hundred percent accurate. I, and the department's Accountability Review Board, could always rely on that fact, but only after the fact.

I had only been away from the chancery for about three hours, but the stinky brown stuff was already beginning to hit the fan based on my cable to Washington. I expected quick feedback, but I was still stunned at how fast the headquarters vipers could strike back. I had to be careful and not only watch my back, but my eyes too since they were capable of spitting the most vitriolic venom when they were cornered. There was no respite or rest or timeout for the wicked and/or middle-aged, weary, white guys in this biz. I could put my hands in a T-shape all day long, but it would still

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make no difference to them. They were unrelenting taskmasters when it came to second-guessing others.

Jersey Briggs had talked to Big Bird and bluntly asked him if I had lost my mind. (I was actually pleased that he recognized that I had one in the first place.) The Bird calmly explained that I was stalling for time with the bad guys. I was looking to catch a break and that I needed more time, he told Jersey. He said that I understood that Washington would never acquiesce to Kris's outrageous demands, but that I still had an obligation to pass them up the chain-of-wisdom, regardless.

I knew I had Ambassador Thurman on my side so Jersey and company couldn't push me too hard. However, if I fell on my sword, the Washingtonians would dance on my body with heavy, size 16 jackboots as it was slowly lowered into the grave. In any case, they were always very good at throwing handfuls of dirt.

State Department camaraderie and collegiality only went as far as the first finger pointing at those who served and protected.

I waited by the phone the rest of the day and into the early evening for Kris Amar to contact me. He finally did, but I was a bit piqued given the late hour. The call came into the chancery, like before. I hesitantly said "hello" to the mouthpiece of the phone. I had my best poker face on so I wouldn't inadvertently give up any facial advantage during the conversation. You can never be too cautious when dealing with coldblooded, Islamic-fascists who also happened to be ruthless, experienced Thugs. Then add their training as mujahedeen warriors bent on total Jihad, along with the annihilation of the entire infidel population to the equation and it doesn't get much scarier or wordier. They were serious bad boys with an attitude and an agenda. They needed a good spanking and I knew just the right person to bend them to his will and over his knee.

Richard Avery

Sometimes those who served and protected needed to administer Uncle Sam's ferocious Bible belt to impudent, heathen behinds.

"Mr. Avery, what did your masters in Washington say about our modest and reasonable demands?" Kris asked without exchanging the normal pleasantries.

"They've agreed to both, but want something in return before they act on them. They want one of the girls released unharmed as a show of good faith. They're all devout Christians and believe in good faith gestures."

I didn't mention anything about miracles though. The phone went silent for about ten seconds and then Kris spoke again.

"We will release Alicia as a sign of our sincerity. However, if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, Zeenat will die a painful death, as I've already mentioned. Her father won't be pleased with you Americans."

I correctly guessed he would agree to Alicia's release. Zeenat Karzai was important to their goals, but Alicia much less so. She was a bit player in this psychodrama, but I could never tell her or her father that. I had her pegged as a mega-bitch who was probably driving her captors crazy with her behavior and attitude. If I held out a little longer, they actually might pay me to take her off their hands. However, I hoped they hadn't read the Ransom of Red Chief, but they might have, given its Indian motif. Therefore, I couldn't push the conditions for her release too far.

"Okay, when and where do we meet?" I asked. "I want to meet you face-to-face when you hand over Alicia and your propaganda tape. If you won't meet me in person, the whole deal is off. I would consider such a decision to be impertinent and a bad faith gesture on your part. Just the two of us, along with Alicia, will meet at a place of your choosing. You have the upper hand in

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selecting the venue,” I added for greater emphasis. I even underscored the point just to make sure he got the message.

Kris Amar thought for about a minute before he announced the location where we would meet. It would be at the large, Jain temple in Old Delhi. I asked him to describe the temple. He readily gave me a brief, physical description of the building. I immediately objected to his choice and told him the dankness and mold would really stir-up my allergies. I wouldn't be able to keep a clear head during the meeting. Moreover, sinusitis was certainly nothing to sneeze at. I don't believe he understood my pun, but did acknowledge that pollution was a serious problem in Delhi. I then chided him for putting my health at risk. He needed to be more considerate with his next choice of venue since he obviously didn't know Dick about Jain.

He next suggested a meeting at Mahatma Gandhi's tomb in New Delhi. Again, I asked him to describe the location in some detail. I mentioned that I wasn't the least bit familiar with Delhi because I had only been in the country for about ten days. Basically, I asked him to cut me some slack as a new visitor to his country. That accommodation would be thoughtful, neighborly, and classy for someone like him with no class standing whatsoever in Indian society. Moreover, it wouldn't be a touching gesture because that act was strictly forbidden in his case or caste. He said he fully understood what I was saying. I was glad he did because I didn't have the slightest clue what I was babbling about, but I must be getting the local patois down pat.

Regardless, I told him that I'd appreciate meeting at another location. Gandhi's tomb was much too open and al fresco. The site would have meant meeting outside under the sun and that wouldn't be good for my precancerous skin condition. I mentioned I had a preexisting, potential, melanoma condition and the doctors warned

me to stay out of the sun or face its deadly consequences. However, I acknowledged that it was no skin off the doctor's nose if I didn't follow his advice. I firmly believed that full disclosure was important in these negotiations. Sorry, I meant to say discussions.

The intense Indian UV rays were just too strong for my sensitive, Nordic skin. I reinforced my point by telling him I had beautiful blue eyes and very fair skin. I mentioned my freckles too. I held nothing back in convincing him we couldn't meet there for sound medical reasons because it could be a death sentence for me. He probably didn't notice these things the last time he saw me because I had shoe polish smeared all over my supine, light-skinned body.

I also took the opportunity to chide him for pinching my balls. It didn't hurt to lay some good, old fashioned guilt on him. I took every advantage I could get. However, I took no bullshit or prisoners in my job of protecting America and upholding the honor of Miss Liberty. She was my charge and I didn't plan to let her go down without a fight. I could tell by the sound of his voice that Kris was getting frustrated with the state of my health.

"Do you have some other meeting locations that are less threatening to my health?" I asked. He was exasperated by my intransigence and sputtered a bit and was silent.

"Look, I can suggest a few places that might be acceptable to you. Meet me halfway on this and let's make a decision. I'm not being unreasonable, only health conscious. How about meeting at my hotel? I can book a conference room and have the little cocktail weenies and Ritz crackers catered. It's five stars so you can't object to the service or ambience," I added to seal the deal.

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He demurred saying he was deathly afraid of Hyatts. He was a shrewd and clever opponent. If I had medical issues, Kris had phobias.

“Okay, how about meeting at the U.S. Embassy? It’s safe and secure. It has a Bubble Room where our conversations can’t be overheard, monitored, or recorded,” I assured him.

He said it would be impossible to meet there. He said he was severely claustrophobic and abhorred polyurethane along with Americans. As much as he liked Don Ho’s Tiny Bubbles, he couldn’t tolerate the confines of the room and its other occupants. It made him too gaseous and no one would be pleased with his involuntary bodily functions in such close quarters. Kris was playing hard to get, I thought.

“What about the Red Fort in Old Delhi?” I finally asked. “It’s the only other place I’ve visited in the fair city since I don’t get out much these days,” I added to fortify my assertion.

He thought about it for a few seconds and agreed to the venue. Kris was a tough bargainer and I would hate to be sitting across from him at the poker table. He kept his hand close to his vest and his hole cards even closer.

We went back and forth over the details of the meeting. I told him I napped in the afternoon and had cocktails between six and seven—sharp. I certainly couldn’t meet during those times since my routine and constitution were too important to upset. He mentioned that he had some obligations to attend to as well. Like praying to Allah five times a day whether he liked it or not since he was a devout Muslim. However, he agreed to bring his prayer rug to facilitate the meeting. We finally set a mutually agreed time and now had a place to meet. We were making progress, but never negotiating.

Richard Avery

“How will I recognize you?” I asked. “All of you sleazy, terrorist assholes look the same to me.”

He said he would be the Indian male holding a videotape cassette in one hand and Alicia Thurman in the other and, therefore, should be easy to spot.

However, I wasn't so sure. “Could you wear a turban so you'll stand out in the crowd?” I politely inquired.

He told me to go to Hell. With that rude retort, I wondered just how charitable and Christian this guy might be. I was sure I'd find out later.

“I'll be the middle-aged white foreigner who looks out of place in a crowd of Indians,” I proudly announced. “I'll be wearing a leisure suit, probably my crimson one with the pearl snap buttons on the jacket. I'll also be wearing highly buffed black wingtip shoes. (I wanted to ask him where I got my shoes, but thought better of it.) I'll have a mum in my jacket lapel, but I'm not sure which color because it all depends on my mood.”

“When we meet, we must exchange passwords just to be certain of each other's true identities. You guys all look the same to me, and vice versa I suspect, so I want to make sure I'm dealing with the right person.”

“I will ask ‘Have you ever picked your toes in Poughkeepsie?’ You will reply ‘Rumpelstiltskin was a wussy freak.’ Do you understand? It's important that you don't screw up your line.” I hoped he didn't find the wording too grim for even his macabre persona.

Kris responded by saying that he was thoroughly familiar with American fairytales by reading many U.S. foreign policy statements over the years.

I still urged him to repeat his response over and over again until he had it memorized. I suggested that he write it down on a

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flash card for rote practice. I figured a secret handshake would be too complicated under the circumstances, although it was standard DS tradecraft. But then I remembered Kris was untouchable. I gave Kris my cell phone number so he could contact me anytime he wanted. He apologized and said he couldn't reciprocate. Jesus, I really detested one-sided conversations and relationships.

Sometimes those who served and protected needed to dissemble and seize the initiative to save the day and storyline.

Chapter 14

The Swap Meet

We had finally caught a break. If things went well, Alicia Thurman would be back in the loving arms of her parents soon. We recognized that we would be getting only half a loaf, but it would still be an important slice we could write home about. Alicia was the daughter of the American Ambassador to India and we all knew on which side our bread was buttered. As to Zeenat Karzai, she would have to bide her time and wait her turn. That meant we didn't have a freaking clue how to rescue her. I only hoped the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan would be understanding and patient.

Good things supposedly come to those who wait. However, that was another aphorism that never came true for me. I was like the guy stood-up by Godot. My interminable patience didn't help my career one bit. Success must not involve a waiting game.

We had to prepare for the meet and didn't have much time to pull things together. I told Chester to brief his IB buddies about the meeting with Kris Amar since we needed their cooperation and support. They would provide necessary security for us in the event Kris tried to double-cross us and pull a fast one. That meant they would put a 7.62 caliber round through his head at 100 yards if he acted up or out. I didn't think he would because he still held the ace up his sleeve—Zeenat Karzai.

I asked Big Bird to brief Ambassador Thurman, but not to provide too much detail. I didn't want him to be too witting to what we had planned so he could maintain plausible denial if

things went to shit. Under no circumstances should he mention anything to Washington. That would simply complicate matters beyond belief.

I instructed Kali to locate a baby stroller and a pillow. She would go undercover as a pregnant mom with a baby in tow. The stroller would conceal the M-4 assault rifle she would be carrying. I could have thought up any number of different roles and disguises for her; however, I hoped this one would humiliate her a bit. This was just the beginning of my payback for her most unconscionable defilement of my body and ego last week. She initially balked at the idea, but quickly backed down even though Kali had Robo-Cop in mind as a guise.

Sometimes those who served and protected as understudies didn't get to choose macho costumes for their acting roles.

Our meeting was scheduled for 4 o'clock which was well after my nap and before cocktail time, so it was okay. It would also give the cops plenty of time to position themselves throughout the Red Fort. I would wear my crimson leisure suit and I looked sharp; perhaps muy macho as some might say. With the Spanish motif, I only hoped I'd have the huevos that went with my scrambled Rancheros and self-doubts.

Sometimes those who served and protected couldn't always make the cover of GQ or Food & Wine magazine.

We reviewed overhead photographs of the Red Fort. Kris and I had agreed to meet at the *Hall of Private Audiences*—one of several palace outbuildings on the large compound. It was a good spot since it was open on all sides. Only its few structural columns provided places of possible concealment. I told Kali where to position herself and her baby, the M-4, a location adjacent to the Hall.

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Chester would serve as liaison officer with the Indian cops and would also be our communications guy. He would be the critical link between our team and the local forces. The Big Bird would hold down the fort at the chancery. We all had specific jobs to do and we had to make sure we knew our roles and responsibilities. Lives, as well as reputations and careers, were once again at stake.

We arrived about a half an hour early and I suspected Kris Amar had done the same, great minds and all of that stuff. That was a scary thought, I thought. Kali was about 200 feet to my left and strolling her stroller up-and-down the asphalt walkway near the Hall. She looked to be about 14 months pregnant. Putting a pillow under her abundant blouse was actually her Idea. Maybe it was a Freudian thing. My guess was she'd need a C-section rather than an episiotomy. I only hoped her water didn't break and spoil things.

Chester was about 150 yards from where I was sitting. He kept saying "test, test, test, one, two, three," into my earpiece. That was disconcerting to say the least, especially since I couldn't talk back. I waited on a bench in front of the Hall. We were ready and the rest of the story would be history, as they say; good, bad or ugly.

"Richard, this is Chester," my earpiece spoke. I knew it was Chester since no one else had my number.

He told me the cops had spotted Kris Amar and his cronies. They had come by speedboat on the Yamuna River, located just behind the fort. He reported there were a total of six people on the boat: five Indian men and a bleached-blond teenage girl. The police reported her long, dark roots were showing. There would be more of Kris's goons skulking around the grounds, I thought. As to Alicia's hair, I'd give her a bottle of peroxide as a welcome home gift.

Kris Amar walked toward me with Alicia in one hand and a video cassette in the other, as promised. Two Thugs wearing long robes were trailing him. Kris was wearing a handmade Giorgio Armani suit by the looks of it. The Thug business must be damned prosperous, I jealously thought. I felt underdressed and gauche in my leisure suit and I was terribly chagrined. However, it was much too late to go back to my hotel and change clothes.

I'd have to gut it out fully knowing that haberdasheries, along with haute couture, were serious matters in the Foreign Service. Unfortunately, I'd been one-upped by a fashionable, heathen wog. I hoped Kali wouldn't blab to our colleagues because the humiliation would be too great. It was my mistake since I had forgotten to ask Kris what he would be wearing to the meeting. I hoped I hadn't made any other mistakes out of sheer ignorance or whole cloth.

Kris Amar stood in front of me and Alicia was quietly crying. If Kris had touched a hair on her bleached-blond head, I'd kill him in a New York second, I swore. I immediately instructed him to sit down. I couldn't abide someone of greater stature lording things over me. He did and we talked. I started the conversation by first asking him if he had picked his toes in Poughkeepsie. He stared back at me with a blank look on his face. Jesus, he had forgotten the response to confirm his true identity, I realized. I could tell by his general anxiety and body language that he was flustered. I couldn't believe it. The Thug had literally choked on his own words!

This was going to be more difficult than I thought. I had to prompt Kris in order to get him to remember his line. It was just more of the "white man's burden" nonsense again. I couldn't wait to leave the country. Ok, it had to be done because there was more than protocol or tradecraft at stake in this exercise. There was a

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gentlemen's agreement as to how this would be done and I had kept my part of the bargain. I was bound and determined he would too and it was now a matter of national honor. Uncle Sam never would welsh on his debts and always beat the crap out of those who stiffed him.

“Okay, Kris here's what we're going to do. We're going to play charades and by doing so, you will remember your line,” I confidently told him.

I began by tugging on my right ear to indicate “sounds like.” He nodded his head indicating he understood the game. I put one finger in the air to tell him it was the first word of the sentence. I then pointed to my leisure suit. It was terribly wrinkled.

I followed that gesture by pulling up my sleeve and pinching and pulling my skin while waiting for him to guess the first word. I was trying to get him to say rumpled and skin and then we could take it from there. I'd forgotten to bring stilts to work with and mentally chided myself for that oversight. However, there were practical limits on stature I had to consider. I mistakenly believed shoe lifts would have sufficed. Kris thought for a few seconds and then said “A wrinkled white guy in a safari suit trying to act out in a pinch? Is that it? Did I get it right? Was I close?” he genuinely asked.

He was getting into the game and getting excited as well. I shook my head. This was going to be much tougher than I thought.

Alicia had stopped crying and was now staring at Kris and I engaged in a bizarre ritual. She seemed to be dumbfounded and speechless, just a typical teenager, I thought. Maybe she had swallowed her bubble gum. I decided to go for the last word of the sentence. I indicated my backward approach to Kris and he said he understood. Wussy was a bit unusual and probably not directly

translatable to either the Sanskrit or Hindi language. Nonetheless, I'd give it a try.

I pointed to a pregnant black woman pushing a baby stroller nearby. I then cupped my hands in the shape of a vagina and positioned the imaginary pussy between my legs. I next made meowing sounds. Pussy, wussy, maybe he would get it and then remember the other words and we could finally get down to business. I heard Alicia laughing; probably feeling more relaxed and secure knowing I was here to save her. Her joy over her imminent release made me feel proud and pleased.

“Niggardly cunt, is that what you're looking for?” Kris tentatively ventured.

“God no, you fucking moron,” I screamed in frustration. “It's Rumpelstiltskin was a wussy freak. Jesus, why can't you remember a simple thing like that?” I yelled at him. I was quickly losing it. Why were foreigners so damn stupid, un-American, and fairytale challenged? I wondered?

“Sorry Dick, I just had a brain fart, as we say here,” he ruefully explained.

So, now it was Dick, huh? Sorry, there was no way his chumminess was going to put me off guard. I didn't want to get choked-up with sentimentality at a time like this.

“Let's get this over with.” I was extremely exasperated and disappointed in Kris' thoughtless performance.

The cocktail hour at my hotel was fast approaching. Drinks were half-price between the hours of six and seven and I'd be damned if I would miss happy-hour because of some ignorant, illiterate Thug, Dalit, Islamic-fascist, Punjabi, mujahedeen extremist who also ran a prosperous crematorium in Banaras. I couldn't care less how successful the guy was in the religious business or underworld. I needed my glasses of wine!

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Kris' goons continued to scan the huge courtyard. The police SWAT teams were well-concealed in the ramparts and behind the many grassy knolls. The only unusual thing was the fort's armaments since they had been turned inward and now faced in our direction. I didn't think anyone would notice the change. Kris then handed me the videotape. Alicia was already standing close to me.

Kris made me sit through another lecture of what was on the tape, how and when it should be played to the public and again mentioned the release of the two Moe's in Kandahar. He warned me, and my Uncle Sam, not to screw things up or else. The else part being the slow, painful death of Zeenat Karzai.

As Kris and his cohorts walked to their speedboat, all hell broke loose. There were bursts of automatic gunfire. I pulled Alicia to the grass and positioned her young, lithe body over mine to protect her from any stray ground fire, per standard DS practice. Fortunately, the shooting was over in seconds. I quickly found out that one of Kris's gunmen had pulled an AK-47 assault rifle from beneath his robe and aimed it in my direction. Kali caught his movement and fired her M-4, on fully-automatic, at the bad guy. He fell to the ground before he could get off any rounds. The Thug was never going to shoot at another frumpily dressed Gringo again.

Kris and company quickly departed the area via the river. It looked like I couldn't fully trust Kris or perhaps the goon was stupidly acting on his own. I didn't know or care since we had rescued Alicia Thurman from the terrorists. America hadn't given up her honor. Score one for the good guys, I thought.

Alicia Thurman got up from the ground, brushed herself off, and put her arms around me, and gave me a big, daughterly kiss on my cheek. Except for her hair, she was a very attractive young

woman with a tightly cut and toned body. After kissing and hugging me she dropped to her knees and threw her arms around my legs. As she held them, she looked up and said I was her hero. I had saved her life and that she would be forever grateful to me. She vowed to pay me back in any and every way possible. She pouted and smiled seductively at me. My merest wish was her command, but only after she turned eighteen in another year, four months and three days, she spoke in my mind. “And what time do you have now, Dick?” she soothingly cooed to my alert libido.

Alicia’s shrill voice woke me from my impure thoughts. “Get the hell away from me, you dickhead!” she screamed. I immediately obliged her request.

“It’s about fucking time you rescued me. Jesus Christ, my father should have demanded that the FBI or the military special operators handle the job. But no, they send a guy named Dick to be my hero. Why did it take you so fucking long? Do you have any idea the shitload of work I have to make up at school?” she not so politely asked.

Alicia was most definitely a Foreign Service brat of the first order. I then recalled that the peroxide would be useful in washing out her mouth too. Truthfully, I’d like to take her over my knee. Of course, that was that sort of fantasy that always got me into trouble with department in the first place.

We debriefed Alicia on the way to the residence. She had virtually nothing new to tell us that we didn’t already know. She said she and Zeenat had been held incommunicado the whole time and moved to several different locations. Chester asked Alicia where Communicado was located since he’d never heard of the city before.

Alicia shot him a dirty look and I smiled to myself. Ok, Mr. Braniac, you just stepped on it, big-time, my friend, I mused.

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However, maybe Alicia was right about the FBI or the Special Forces. Maybe we should have handed-off the case to a higher intelligence authority. I didn't know or particularly care at that point. Happy Hour was fast approaching and I was thirsty.

Sometimes those who served and protected would gladly share glory and agony with their worthy security partners.

The ambassador and his wife held an impromptu cocktail reception early in the evening to celebrate Alicia's release. I was invited but declined, feigning too much sun exposure. I simply hated such parties. Why would you want to socialize with same people that you had to work with day-in and day-out? It made no sense to me. Then again, it was the Foreign Service culture.

I decided to draft a cable to Washington and give Jersey the good news about Alicia's release. He could tout his role in the investigation to his superiors to garner kudos. That was fine by me since I didn't have a career anymore. I also didn't have much self-esteem left either. I walked back to my hotel after I wrote the cable. There were still about 20 minutes left on the hotel happy-hour clock so I ordered three drinks at once to make up for lost time and took them to my room. I wasn't a single-fisted drinker by any means.

I was down and depressed so I decided to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the States. I had to talk to someone about my angst and emotional pain. I simply couldn't disclose my concerns and misgivings to my colleagues. After all, I was their leader and had to be strong for the team.

The call went through and I was connected to its call-center in Islamabad, Pakistan. I explained to the counselor that I was depressed and just perhaps suicidal. Surprisingly, he was ecstatic and asked if I could drive a truck! I immediately slammed down the phone and yelled several deleted expletives. The nervy

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bastards never quit, do they? When you were down, they invariably kicked you in the crotch with those funny pointed shoes like the characters in Aladdin wore.

Sometimes those who served and protected just wanted to get through the night and keep on trucking while crying in their beers or whines.

Chapter 15

Natural Artificial Intelligence

I was awakened at about 4:00 in the morning by a phone call from Kris Amar. He called for a couple of reasons and not just to chat. First, he told me he didn't order his goon to open fire on me at the Red Fort. He said the shooter was a loose cannon who acted on his own. I told him I accepted his explanation and the fact the shooter had moved onto another life in the never-ending karmic drama of reincarnation. In other words, I told him the bastard got what he deserved. Kris didn't particularly appreciate my description of his underling's demise, but he didn't argue the point.

Kris then hammered me on the deal; the agreement, the bargain, we had struck—his demands for the United States to air the Islamic extremist video and to release the two Taliban, mujahedeen (perhaps al-Qaida) prisoners of war in Afghanistan. Christ, I couldn't tell the players any more without a scorecard, I thought. We really must carpet bomb these rag-heads back to the Stone Age. I certainly didn't tell Kris that Washington had turned down his demands cold. They were dead-on-arrival as the pundits liked to say. Instead, I told him the logistics of airing the tape were being worked out in Washington. It wasn't a lie, just a prevarication. That sort of distinction, without a difference, was permitted in department-speak. Truthfully, it was often encouraged as a negotiating tactic when the truth might be a bit nettlesome.

I continued my spiel. As he could imagine, preempting national television programming would be a major event that must

be coordinated with many people and organizations before it could happen. It wasn't an easy or quick matter to resolve. I told Kris he had to accept the realities of life in America. Nothing was easy when it came to television. The boob-tube was the opiate of the masses and the viewing public cherished their favorite programs. There could be insurrection and rebellion if a given TV episode was preempted by a public service announcement. It could be too much to bear, even if it was Smokey. Blood could flow in America's streets. Sesame Street could be a particularly gruesome example of the citizenry's wrath, I thought. I then began to worry about Big Bird's safety.

The United States government simply needed more time to work out the details. I told Kris that the release of the two prisoners would be easier and that we should concentrate on that aspect of the demands for the short-term. I hung up the phone and rolled over and went back to sleep.

Sleep came easily for those who served and protected and had clear consciences, lazy libidos, and too much wine.

The next morning the team met in the task force room and we congratulated ourselves on getting Alicia Thurman released unharmed. We also hadn't harmed Uncle Sam's image, so we were ahead of the game for a change. However, Kris Amar was expecting us to deliver concrete results and to deliver them quickly. We had to finesse his demands and expectations until we could get Zeenat Karzai released. She was the top prize in this geopolitical game of tug-of-war.

I started off our meeting by assuring Kali that I would back her play a thousand percent with the DS board of inquiry that would likely be convened over the killing of the Thug at the Red Fort. I had her back, I promised her, as I smirked. She simply gave me the

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finger. She had, perhaps, saved my life, or more likely Alicia's, by her quick action.

This was the customary, time-honored way that DS agents schmoozed and bonded as a band of brothers and sometimes sisters. The metro-sexual agents got to choose their gender under the system. But we were always there for each other when the chips were down or cows came home. However, the problem was trying to identify where there was. Was it in the loop or outside? Was it a career-enhancing place or not? Was its location usefully expedient or expeditious? Did it tend to self-serve and promote? These were critical factors to consider when stepping forward in defense of a colleague. In other words, we'd let Kali twist in the wind awhile before we came to her defense. This was the fun part of pushing the bureaucratic envelope and her buttons.

We reviewed yesterday's events and I briefed the team on my late night/early morning call from Kris. We were still on the hook for Zeenat's life and personal safety and we all took those responsibilities very seriously. We still had much work to do before we could drop our packs and rest. We liked to use strong military terms like "taking our packs off" in the State Department. That's because we didn't have any weapons of mass destruction to threaten others with. Therefore, words alone must suffice.

I then mentioned the P-LINT I had used on Kris Amar's clothes. It might very well lead us to him and Zeenat. Chester and Kali weren't familiar with P-LINT and its use. I patiently explained that P-LINT was an offshoot, a subset of E-LINT, or electronics intelligence, that our nation had developed and successfully used over the years to exploit the enemy's signals and communications assets. It was a very effective intelligence tool when used properly and under the right circumstances.

I explained that DS's Technical Services Division was instrumental in developing P-LINT for practical application. Its alchemists had discovered that ordinary pocket lint; especially cotton fiber and fuzz balls, was a superior conductor of electricity when mixed with finely pulverized horseshoe magnets and electrolytes. They correctly theorized, and then perfected, a process whereby pocket lint could be converted into micro-particles that created powerful magnetic fields.

Headquarters agents were constantly solicited for source materials to carry out vital experiments with the potent substance. Agents stood on their heads and turned their pockets inside-out for the organization. The collection process was usually fast and easy since the agents typically didn't have two cents to rub together then. Those unable to contribute were ordered to phone home and have their wives clean out the lint filter of the clothes dryer. All out-of-pocket donations were readily accepted in those early days.

The scientists took the process to its next logical level and created super-micro transmitters made essentially of lint. The electrolytes were the key to providing the power source to the material. Gatorade was especially effective, although Ginger Ale and 7-Up were good substitutes in a pinch. After congealing, the substance was micro-waved for precisely 3 minutes and 20 seconds and then left to cool. P-LINT was a brilliant intelligence and technological breakthrough.

Moreover, the lint didn't have to be clumped together to be effective. It was only necessary for the particles to be in relative close proximity to each other to create a powerful beam or signal that could easily be picked up by our monitors anywhere in the world. The existence of the substance was a closely guarded secret because the P-LINT specs had many intelligence possibilities. The most prominent of which was the creation of a nearly invisible

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GPS homing beacon. With the technology, we could locate a target almost anywhere in the world within a radius of about 200 yards.

Kris Amar had been “LINTED,” as we said in the trade, when he sat down on the bench beside me. The tiny Velcro impregnated particles held firmly to his suit pants and jacket. The P-LINT particles wouldn’t be noticed given their minuscule size. They were virtually impossible to detect, unless you were looking for them with a magnifying glass. DS, and other federal security agencies, were rightly concerned that the bad guys could have picked-up on the breakthrough discovery, reverse-engineer the process, and used it against us.

Therefore, before conducting any black operations, U.S. agents would use lint rollers and brushes on their clothes as a security precaution. They would vigorously clean their trousers and shirts. They would remove their sport or suit jackets and run the roller up-and-down the fabric to ensure complete coverage and removal of any errant particles. If you watched closely, you could see Secret Service agents, as well as other law enforcement authorities, flicking lint off a jacket sleeve or shirt cuff. They typically performed this bit of tradecraft off-camera for security reasons, but sometimes you could catch them brushing a pant leg or combing their hair. They were not only well-groomed and neatly dressed, but they were being security cautious. Loose lips, improper grooming, and pocket lint could sink ships in this intelligence biz.

There could be no mistakes when handling P-LINT. Black clothing, in particular, tended to highlight the particles. Under certain lighting conditions, they might even be seen by the naked eye, if you were looking for them. Dandruff was always a concern given its similar appearance and properties. It was all a matter of

applying security measures and countermeasures—spy versus spy, versus spy, etc. It got to be very confusing after a while.

Sometimes those who served and protected tended to nitpick for the greater good and security of our beloved nation.

Kris Amar, or at least his Armani suit, was in the city of Agra at the moment according to our traces of the P-LINT. Unlike other U.S. government institutions and personalities, the P-LINT didn't lie. Kris, and presumably Zeenat, was on the grounds of the Taj Mahal. That location made perfect sense in a couple of respects. First, the Taj was built by Shah Jihan as a memorial to his deceased wife. Shah Jihan was a Mughal Emperor in the 17th century and ruled a good section of north-central India from his palace at Agra. Mughal meant Muslim, in this case; the invaders who subjugated the indigenous Hindu population. Obviously, the Muslim hordes were frisky back in the days of yore too. It was a fitting location for an Islamic zealot like Kris who possessed a keen sense of culture, history, and irony—and a great taste in suits.

Secondly, the Yamuna River flowed through Agra, the same river located behind the Red Fort in Old Delhi. Kris' mode of arrival at the meeting now made more sense. He used a fast boat and could also avoid paying the tolls on the highway between Delhi and Agra. He was clever and extremely thrifty. I knew that the city of Agra was located about a hundred and ten miles south of Delhi. Kris went with the river's flow and that was clever on his part. I admired both his seamanship and skating skills. In any event, he avoided capture by the Indian authorities. On average, their outboard motor powered dhows consistently fell behind Kris's speedboat early in the day's run-up. The Indian police boats were not up to any endurance standards and were poor substitutes for high-speed chase boats.

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Sometimes the stocks of those who served and protected rose and fell on the technology of their craft.

I asked Alicia how long she had been aboard the speedboat. She said the trip lasted about 20 minutes, but she couldn't be certain since she was blindfolded. I gave her my peroxide present and suggested that she thoroughly blow-dry her head afterward to get the cobwebs out. She immediately started freaking-out and vigorously ran her fingers through the strands of her long black and yellow hair. I told her I was only joking and she thanked me by flipping me the bird. Regardless, the short boat ride suggested that Kris and company had been in Delhi and had now moved their operations, along with Zeenat, to Agra.

I left the embassy in time to catch the happy-hour at the hotel. I invited Kali to join me because the drinks were half-priced and she could better afford to buy them for us. We decompressed while drinking and getting drunk. We talked about mutual friends in the department. That dialogue took less than twenty seconds by my count so we moved onto other topics. The weather was always a safe subject of polite conversation, but we stayed away from sensitive political and religious issues.

I asked her how she felt about India's rainy season and the current administration's rightwing, Christian fundamentalist view of the world. The question was intended to be an ice-breaker. It was as she poured a full glass of ice over my head. I think she may have been a coldhearted Republican at heart. In any case, I could tell I'd gotten her attention and piqued her curiosity as to what I was up to with all the nicey-nice-have-a-drink-with-me crap.

I finally admitted that it was all a ruse to seduce her. I told her I wanted to experience sexual pleasures at her hand while I was still awake and more-or-less sober. I mentioned that I lived in the

neighborhood and wondered if we could screw our brains out after finishing our drinks. However, I insisted we stay the entire hour so she could get her money's worth. I was very thoughtful with a date's money. I had a firm rule to only screw true, nymphomaniac patriots holding an active security clearance. As a public servant, I had high standards to uphold too!

Kali was an insightful woman and trained DS investigator since she had already figured out what I wanted. Correctly gauging motives and intentions was a critical step in becoming a good detective in our profession. She said she thought I might have sex on my mind when I had reached between her legs and stroked her inner thighs. She was a very perceptive woman who had broken the code wide-open, I thought. I congratulated her and continued to massage her thighs with the back of my hand.

We took our last round of happy-hour drinks to my room since the mini-bar booze and room service were too damned expensive. I planned to give Kali the ride of her life tonight. I had prepared some party favors to pay her back for what she did to me the previous week. No doubt, it would be a fun and educational experience for her. I planned to hoist her on her own petard, so to speak. I wanted to give her a sensory overload that she would never forget by playing into the kinks and fantasies that she had disclosed to me the other night before I passed out. Kali was going to be Richard Avery dicked—and dicked hard. My fierce lance would offer no mercy or pity in this joust.

I immediately excused myself and went to the bathroom. I stripped off my clothes and put on a police uniform like those worn by California Highway Patrol officers. I looked chipper, I thought. The black motorcycle boots were an especially nice touch. I added a pair of Ray-Bans to the costume and I was set. I

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looked the role of a uniformed patrol cop from head to toe. More importantly, I was a study in masculinity and authority.

I marched back into the room and stood at the side of the bed where Kali had curled up like a kitten. When she saw me, her eyes got wide and she sat upright. She had a broad smile on her face and obviously liked what she saw. She should have been awed since I was six feet of pure, throbbing manhood standing before her.

“Where’s the fire ma’am?” I politely, but firmly asked. “I clocked you going 75 in a 50. That’s considered reckless driving and a very serious traffic offense under the California penal code. That could even buy you a few days in jail, if you draw a grumpy judge.”

“I’m sorry officer. I wasn’t paying attention to my speed. That’s because the fire you mentioned was raging between my thighs. Could you extinguish it for me with your big hose?” pouting as she spoke. Kali was really getting into this stuff, as I’d hoped.

“Ma’am, I’m not a fireman—that’s a different fantasy,” I sternly replied. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to arrest you. The penal code doesn’t make any exceptions, even for a hot black chick.”

“Oh gosh, please show me your penal code, officer. You can throw the book at me if you’d like,” she replied.

I sensed that Kali was getting excited and aroused. I could imagine what she must be experiencing by her body language and double intenders. My plan was working to plan as planned.

“Put your hands in front of you,” I ordered. She complied and I snapped a set of cuffs on her wrists.

“Oh, those are so strong and hard, just like you, officer,” she squealed in delight.

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I took a flex-cuff and tied her cuffed hands to the foot of the bedstead. She was now lying on her stomach, facing the large screen television. For the next 30 minutes or so I teased and caressed her with my baton and she writhed and wriggled under its gentle touch. I poked, prodded, and probed her body from head to foot. She was ecstatic and extremely happy too. At one point, she asked about a glass of water. I thanked her for the thoughtful gesture, but said I couldn't drink on the job.

Kali then climaxed for the first time of many. She called out my name several times while she had a tremendous orgasm. "Dick, dick, I want more dick! Oh God, please give me more dick. Don't make me plead for any more and just give it to me hard," she screamed in uncontrolled pleasure. I was touched by the fact that she was thinking about me and not herself at this most intimate moment. I was now fully convinced that women were nurturing partners at heart.

Kali finally went limp from exhaustion, but I didn't. I was just getting started. I turned on the TV and pressed the start button to the DVD player. The theme song from Hawaii Five-O blared from the stereo speakers. For the next 45 minutes Kali watched Jack Lord, one of her favorite cop actors, fight the bad guys. She quickly became aroused and climaxed again during the first commercial. It was a public service spot for the Police Benevolent Society of America. It was evident that Jack met her criteria for an idealized, fantasy detective. He was middle-aged, white, and paunchy. I think he wore a toupee and I mentioned that tidbit to further excite her.

Kali was floating on cloud nine without a parachute. She didn't want to come down and I wouldn't let her just yet. Her sexual tensions were high, but they were about to go over the top of the mountain.

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Sometimes those who served and protected needed the Lord's help to get the job done.

I straddled Kali and started reading selected passages from Dashiell Hammett's novels about Sam Spade and Nick Charles. I did this while she watched a Magnum PI episode. I would occasionally put a lollipop in my mouth and ask, "Who loves ya, baby?" I knew that Kali really loved the Telly.

The combination of raw stimuli caused her to experience orgasmic releases and multiple, volcanic eruptions. Mount Vesuvius would have been ashen with envy. Kali then passed out cold. She was now comatose, but fully sated by my ministrations. I removed the handcuffs and gently tucked her into bed. As I did, I noticed the St. Michael medal around her neck. I now was certain that she was a true believer in all things law enforcement.

Chapter 16

Afghan Hounds of Hell

The FLASH message awaited me in the chancery's communications center. The embassy's duty officer had called me earlier in the morning telling me I'd better get my butt into work. Washington was calling and I needed to answer the phone. I let Kali sleep since she'd had an exhausting night and was tuckered out. I walked and smoked the short distance to the chancery. My walks to and from my hotel were times that I could relax and be myself, except for the occasional sneak attack by a Thug. But nothing was perfect, I guessed.

The cable was short and to the point. I was to go to Afghanistan and meet with President Hamid Karzai. I had been summoned for a private audience with His Nibs. It was an order and not a request. Karzai wanted to know how the U.S. government was going to get his daughter back alive and unharmed. I wanted to know the same, but I wouldn't tell him that. That wouldn't be a confidence-builder in terms of bilateral relations. It would also buy me a one-way ticket to Washington via steerage. I wasn't ready to throw in the towel or give up the ghost or fold my hand or tent. I still had a few cards to play and I was still betting I could beat the house. However, the odds weren't good.

I sent a back-channel message to the RSO in Kabul telling him about my plans to visit. I asked if he could hook me up with a room on the embassy compound. I would be staying overnight because of the flight connections, but would be there less than 24

hours. I'd been to Kabul on behalf of the department a few months earlier on a fraud investigation and knew the embassy fairly well. However, I suspected that many of the Foreign Service officers and others I had known there had rotated out-of-country. It wasn't one of my favorite watering holes, but I could tough it out for one night, I believed.

I booked a flight on Indian Air to Kabul. It was a two hour, non-stop flight from the second world to the bottom of the third. I wasn't going up in this world, I thought and that thought depressed me. I returned to the hotel and packed an overnight bag and gave Kali a kiss on the cheek, leaving a note telling her where I was heading. I really liked and admired her, despite her sexual proclivities and excesses. She simply needed a white, middle-aged gentleman to show her the ropes and how to tie them properly.

I was met at Kabul International Airport by an old friend named Ahmed Chollowby. He had been an embassy driver when I was last in Kabul, but had now become a successful businessman by opening a KFC franchise on the main road between the airport and the embassy. He was an invaluable resource during my fraud investigation, and was now a friend and we exchanged pleasantries and caught up on each other's lives.

He said business had been good and that he and his wife were expecting their 13th child, an even baker's dozen. I asked when he was going to stop fathering kids. He said that would happen when he couldn't get it up anymore. He mentioned that Afghan men were renowned for their sexual prowess and virility. (Fortunately, he didn't mention the export of raw heroin too.) He quickly added that Viagra was now his best, new American friend. I had been replaced it seemed, so much for lasting friendships!

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Ahmed dropped me at the embassy where I met with the RSO, largely as a courtesy. I asked if there was anything new regarding the backgrounds of Mohammed and Kamal, the two APPF agents assigned to guard Zeenat. He said there wasn't. He also said Zeenat's disappearance hadn't been mentioned in the APPF ranks. He took that as a good sign that her kidnapping hadn't leaked yet. I had paid my respects to the embassy and was now off the protocol hook. I next went to my room that was a converted CONEX shipping container with all the comforts of home with those comforts squeezed into its 7 by 15- foot confines.

My appointment with President Hamid Karzai was scheduled for 10:00 sharp the next morning. I had a cigarette in my room before heading to dinner. I knew from my previous visit that lamb, lamb, and more lamb would be on the menu. Thank God they didn't serve mutton too! I actually liked lamb, but not every night, so I looked forward to tonight's fare. I ate and I hit the rack early. That was another macho expression that we used in the Foreign Service for reasons already explained. "Hit the rack" or "Take off the pack." It was all the same lingo for impotent public servants.

The next morning I was ushered into President Karzai's private office at the palace. I hadn't noticed too many changes from my previous visit, except one. King Zahir Shah had died in the intervening months. He had returned to the country after the departure of the Taliban after 29 years in exile. He was a father figure to the Afghan people, but not a political force. He would be remembered and respected, but the governance of the country would stay the same course: limited, sketchy, tenuous, and mostly ineffectual.

Afghanistan was a fractious, factious country comprised of fiefdoms ruled by tribal elders, warlords, drug lords or a

combination thereof. Centralized governance was still a foreign concept. I respected Karzai's grit by hanging-in; however, his personal safety was always at risk and I wouldn't bet on his continued tenure in office.

I introduced myself to the President and sat down. He was wearing his trademark garb: the flowing cape and karakul hat. His headgear was a football shaped fez made from the fur of aborted lamb fetuses. Identical ones were now being sold in the chic, high-end fashion emporiums of the world. It was a fad that had some legs and other body parts, I sheepishly reminded myself.

It didn't take him long to get down to brass tacks and they were sharp and aimed in my direction. He had me on the defensive from the beginning of our dialogue. Perhaps monologue was closer to the truth. He was upset and speaking as a father and not as a head of state. I was being taken behind the woodshed for a good whuppin' in order to get my undivided attention. He wanted results and not excuses. Those results consisted of getting his daughter Zaneet safely returned to him unharmed. He said he had run out of patience with the U.S. government. If we didn't do something soon, he would have to go public with the story and take his chances with the media, public opinion, his limited constituency, and the terrorist kidnapers.

He was especially upset that the ambassador's daughter, and not Zeenat, had been returned by the terrorists. He said he took that as a personal affront and an embarrassment to his country. It appeared to him that the Americans were looking out for their own first, and foremost, to the exclusion of his daughter. He was laying the guilt crap on pretty thick, but he was right and I would have done the same in his shoes. However, given an absolute choice, the ambassador's daughter would have been given priority in a rescue

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operation over the daughter of the head of state of a backwater, third world country—ally or no ally.

I assured him that the U.S. government still had his and his daughter's interests at heart. We hadn't stopped searching for the bad guys in order to find and rescue Zeenat. That was still our goal and commitment. I added that the release of the ambassador's daughter had no bearing on our investigation. I alluded to the fact that her release may have actually facilitated the search for Zeenat, but I didn't go into any detail. I simply couldn't tell him more under the circumstances. I badly wanted to tell him that we believed his daughter was in Agra, India, but couldn't. If there was a leak, we would be dead in the water and so would Zeenat Karzai. After a few more minutes of questions and answers, I was dismissed, but I was handed my head before I left the room.

My cheeks burned from the brusque tongue-lashing I had just received from President Karzai. I wouldn't be able to sit comfortably for a couple of days. I had taken the heat for the department and Uncle Sam. While it goes with the territory, it was never a pleasant experience. I couldn't wait to leave the country to nurse my wounds.

However, I couldn't leave quite yet since I had been buttonholed and stiff-armed by the Director of the Afghan Presidential Protection Force, Abdullah y Abdullah—the engineer. He was referred to as the engineer because that was what he was before becoming the director of the APPF. He had been a civil engineer who had been plucked from obscurity by the President given the fact they were clansmen and friends. Their families had been intertwined for generations. Personal loyalty, not experience, counted most when protecting the President of Afghanistan. It was probably a wise choice because you couldn't tell the players without a scorecard here. The fifth-columnist quislings looked like

everyone else and those were the mujahedeen warriors loyal to both the Taliban and al-Qaida.

“Mr. Avery, it’s good to meet you again,” he said as we sipped strong, hot tea in his office. I would pretend to drink to be polite, but I never took a sip. I not only hated the taste, but I worried about the hygienic aspect of the ritual as well. I had met the engineer’s assistant once, while we were standing next to each other at the urinals in the building’s filthy lavatory. The urinals didn’t flush because there was no water pressure. That meant there was no water with which to wash one’s hands afterwards. However, even if the plumbing worked, the water wasn’t close to being potable or drinkable either.

We had shaken hands over the coffee cum tea table in his office. I had briefly met the engineer during my previous visit to Kabul. He seemed to be a fairly affable guy who spoke fair English. His English, of course, was better than my Farsi, Pashto and Arabic combined. I didn’t speak or understand any of them, so I couldn’t complain too loudly. I couldn’t wait for English to become the official world language. Esperanto hadn’t caught on, but maybe English had a shot.

“President Karzai has asked me to inform you and your government that we are quickly losing patience with the investigation you are conducting. Zeenat Karzai must be found and released soonest. If not, we are prepared to launch our own inquiries and make our own efforts to recover her,” the engineer said.

“The relations between Afghanistan and India are strong and cordial. We believe the Indians would cooperate and assist us in our endeavors to find Zeenat. Mr. Avery, you have 48 hours to bring Zeenat home. If not, we will launch our own investigation

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and mount unilateral operations against her captors. We are preparing to do so as we speak.”

I didn't doubt his sincerity or his intentions, but one more player in this drama would only complicate, not help matters.

“Mr. Abdullah, I appreciate the pressure you and your government are under. Your organization failed to protect Zeenat and now you want the U.S. government to make things better. (I couldn't help zinging him.) We have tried our best and will continue to do so until Zeenat is found.” I decided to leave out the ‘dead or alive’ part for the sake of brevity. His English might not be that good, I thought.

“I have a lead as to Zeenat's whereabouts,” I continued. “I think it is a solid one, but I need more time to develop a plan of action. We don't want to act precipitously and endanger her life.”

I reminded him of the kidnapping of U.S. Ambassador Spike Dubs in Kabul in 1979. Ambassador Dubs and his captors were holed-up in a hotel room in the central city. Despite American pleas for caution, the Russians, precipitously and tragically, stormed the room where he was being held. The ambassador was killed, along with the terrorists, by a botched operation by the Russian Special Forces. I told him I didn't want that to happen to Zeenat.

He acknowledged the incident and agreed that it was a terrible outcome. He said he understood my situation and predicament, but the die was cast. I had 48 hours to find Zeenat Karzai. I then asked him which time zone he was using, but he didn't laugh at my feeble, untimely attempt at humor.

Sometimes those who served and protected couldn't pull-up their bootstraps with a little American levity or levitation.

Chapter 17

Beholding a World Wonder

There were only seven wonders of the modern world and the Taj Mahal in Agra was one. I wondered aloud why a worldly guy like me didn't make the cut. I suspected the other team members harbored no doubts so that was why they kept silent. We had gathered in the task force room for a skull session to plan our rescue of Zeenat. I'd rather face the bad guys any day than her father's wrath. I didn't want to end up as another feather or fetus in his cap.

We had diligently pored over the scant photo-intelligence for Agra and had Googled everything we could find in order to familiarize ourselves with our target. However, we still needed more details to fill in the many blanks in our picture puzzle.

I had Chester go out and buy all the latest tourist postcards and maps of Agra and the Taj. It would be a good training exercise and photo opportunity for him. We had arranged the cards into one huge montage on one of the office's walls. We did so by cutting and pasting various views and angles together to make the Taj's grounds whole. We had eliminated the extraneous shots of the elephant rides and monkey dancers from the vista since they didn't add any real intelligence value to the overall picture.

Regardless, I would take them home for my scrapbook containing the many achievements and highlights of my long government career. However, I was still trying to fill-up the first page. The snapshots of my hospital delivery took up most of the

space though. Like most people, I liked to start important things at their very beginning.

The Michelin road maps and the Fodor travel guide would be particularly useful in our planning. At a minimum, our game plan called for finding decent lodging and dining accommodations in Agra. We were very adept at properly prioritizing things in the department.

Sometimes those who served and protected used their imagination and ingenuity to overcome life's daily care, feeding, and intelligence adversities.

Our tactical intelligence collage had come together nicely and I was proud of our handiwork. I gave Big Bird a gold star for his clever placing of the letters N, E, W, and S on the map for better guidance and direction. It was welcomed news in my opinion. Fortunately, we now understood which way was up. All we needed was a moral compass to follow in order to deliver us to our collective destinies. Yellow brick roads were hard to locate in India unless you trailed the numerous herds of sacred cattle aimlessly roaming the streets of the country.

Our cutting, gluing, and posting of the picture postcards would pay immediate benefits as well as provide a colorful wall covering for the room. We had to improvise because neither the embassy's defense attaché nor the CIA station had any maps or photos of the area. They had come up empty-handed, a day late, and a dollar short to put things into better perspective.

They claimed it was not an optical oversight, or transparent intelligence failure, on their parts. They both asserted that the Taj Mahal was not on the U.S. hit-list for a preemptive nuclear strike, at least yet. Simply put, there was no intelligence requirement for such information for the Single Integrated Operating Plan—the U.S. global plan for all-out war. Actually, they were the ones who

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first suggested buying postcards from the street vendors. It turned out to be a brilliant, low-cost solution to our problem.

Sometimes those who served and protected had to be creative but pernicious souls to avoid being all over the map.

The Big Bird rolled in a TV set and DVD player and inserted a CD into the player. It was a History Channel documentary on the Taj Mahal provided by the embassy's Cultural Affairs officer, a credible, reliable intelligence source in my opinion. The narrator was someone famous, but I couldn't remember his name. He said the Taj was a mausoleum that was built under Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his favorite wife, Mumatz Mahal.

It was built on a parcel of land to the south of the walled city of Agra. It took roughly twelve years to complete the tomb portion and another ten years to construct the mosque, minarets, and gateway to the grounds. The Taj complex was bounded by red sandstone walls on three sides with the Yamuna River facing the open side. Outside the walls were several additional mausoleums, including those of Shah Jahan's other wives, and a larger tomb for Mumtaz's favorite servant.

In 1631, Shah Jahan was grief stricken when Mumatz died during childbirth. The construction of the Taj began almost immediately following her death. Soon after the Taj was completed, the emperor was deposed by his son and put under house arrest at nearby Agra Fort. Upon Shah Jahan's death, his son had him buried next to Mumatz in the Taj Mahal. What's his name got in the last word before the credits rolled. I didn't bother to search for his name since he was ancient history too.

According to our P-LINT intelligence, Kris Amar's suit was on the Taj Mahal grounds somewhere in close proximity to the

mosque at the far end of the complex. We had tracked his suit during the past 24 hours as it moved about Agra. However, it always returned to the Taj's grounds. That must suit him, I thought. Regardless, I planned to take it, and him, to the cleaners.

Our D-day was tomorrow at high noon. It would be a Saturday; the busiest day of the week at the busiest time of the day. We would all go in mufti to conceal our identities and to better blend in with the local populace and tourists. We would disguise ourselves as Indians, but the American kind. We would pass ourselves off as kinsmen who were visiting their brethren from across the great, wide pond. This ploy would create instant credibility among the other natives. It would be a convincing, natural performance.

Our plan couldn't fail or we'd end up as mounds of raw, ground-up meat, courtesy of blood thirsty Thugs. And I wasn't mincing my words one iota. Thank God none of us were called Chuck!

We would insinuate ourselves among the tour groups in order to locate Kris's suit and Zeenat. I thought the plan had chutzpah and Americana written all over its native face. Speaking of faces, Big Bird and I would have to use shoe polish to darken our light countenances. I thought Chester would be fine without any makeup. It was the same with Kali since she would go as a black sheep member of the Blackfoot tribe. We would put on our game faces for our Uncle Sam. We could crack some white, Anglo-American jokes to better establish our credentials and rapport with the locals. I was pleased since we had a purpose and now a plan.

Sometimes those who served and protected liked to dress-up, and whoop it up, on weekends.

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We started to prepare in earnest while still staying in the task force room. I instructed Chester to go to the local market and bring back materials to make our costumes. As a newly-minted United States citizen, he should know his Western history well enough by now. While Chester was shopping, I provided metal hand-clickers to Kali and the Big Bird. I'd bought these trinkets from the street kids during my first visit to the Red Fort. I knew they'd come in handy and handily at some point. Each was shaped like a frog. We would each use these during the operation to securely communicate with each other. I was proud since this was tried and true DS tradecraft in action. Of course that meant it was cheap and of questionable utility.

We had simply improved on the Navajo code-talk by employing a wordless method of signaling. In the unlikely event someone broke our clicks and clacks; they still had to decipher their intonations and intuitions. It was foolproof and the NSA would be seriously envious of our technology.

Big Bird, Kali and I practiced our frog calls for the next half-hour or so to get the hang of it. I was never a confident public speaker so I had some difficulty at first. We pushed the frogs protruding bellies with relish and rapidity. The critters repeatedly spoke their clicks and clacks with vigor in return.

After a while, we all got pretty good at communicating in frog language. We even tried telling some off-color jokes to check its humor functionality. Unfortunately, things really didn't click in this regard. However, I was convinced the devices would work well unless they outright croaked on us. One could never be totally confident with handmade, Indian amphibians.

There was one more piece of security gear I passed out to the team. It was a critical signaling device for emergencies only. It was a noisemaker that rolled out its paper tongue when blowing

into its mouthpiece. It was perfect for our purposes, but again only to be used in emergency situations.

Chester returned with several large bags of supplies to create our costumes. The first task was to make our headdresses. He opened a bag containing chicken feathers and goose down. I reminded him that we were disguising ourselves as American Indians and not as throw pillows or ski jackets. Moreover, I worried that they might not be hypoallergenic. After all, there was a personal health issue to consider. Chester patiently explained that sales of hawk feathers, and those of similar birds of prey, were banned by the Indian government over concerns about their extinction. I told him that was also a concern for us and we should pray too. However, it looked like we had to go with what we had and needed to improvise once again. As if on cue, Big Bird ordered up boxes of plastic straws from the cafeteria and we went to work.

We attached the feathers to the straws with super-glue because we didn't want to take any chances that we'd get blown-off by the bad guys. Moreover, the straws had to stick together like birds of a feather. The task was similar to putting together an artificial Christmas tree, but without the religiosity. Kali had it the easiest since she only had to make one straw feather as an Indian maiden. She'd simply stick it into her hair bun at the back of her head. I thought it looked like a bottlebrush, but I didn't say anything for fear of hurting her feelings and getting cut off from sex. Discretion was the better part of valor when it came to matters of the head and heart.

Chester made three feathers and held them in place with a headband. With some war paint, he'd look like a brave buck. The Big Bird's headgear was more elaborate since he had used six straws. He decided to wear two clumps of three feathers each at

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the back of his head. By separating them, he resembled a bull on a bad hair day. My headdress was the most dramatic since I was the chief of this tribe of misfits and it was only fitting. My magnificent war bonnet had twelve straws since they were cheaper that way. Moreover, I adamantly refused to go to this little costume party as a baker. I uniformly arranged the feathers around my head and looked at myself in a mirror and laughed. I resembled a lanky crown roast. However, our get-ups would be good enough to fool the bad guys if we stayed in costume, character, and on course.

Next came the body and foot wear—carefully mending it to our couture. It couldn't be too over-the-top since that wouldn't be convincing. We decided to stay with the basics; fur and skins, faux or otherwise. Kali chose to make a bearskin bodice out of a polyester, fake-fur rug. Indian carpets were world renowned for their beauty and craftsmanship. Big Bird opted for sheepskin and looked like a biblical figure from ancient Judea. Chester went with the buffalo robe look; water buffalo, but it was close enough to buffalo anyone. My choice was obvious—pigskin. I would drape it over me from snout to hoof. Kris Amar wouldn't get near me for fear of going to Hell or whatever the Muslims called the place down-under. Fortunately, I would be wholly unclean and untouchable in his view and religion. That was terribly ironic given the fact that he was a Dalit who was expected to clean-up warm shit for a living. Jesus, what did that make me? I wondered. In any case, I planned to stay as non-kosher for the entire operation.

Appropriate footwear was necessary as a final touch to our American Indian outfits. We didn't want to give ourselves away by being improperly shod since shoddiness was never permitted in the department. Everyone decided to wrap brown paper lunch bags around their feet to resemble moccasins. The booties were adorned

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with animistic, mystic, and magical signs drawn in bold, black Magic Marker pen. Realism and authenticity were essential ingredients to the success of our mission. In the department, as nitpickers, we'd been taught to pay close attention to the smallest details. "For the want of a nail, a shoe was lost..." as the saying patently begins. I didn't understand what that bit of sophistry meant, but my black wingtips were now encased in paper sacks tied at my ankles. They were destined to kick some fundamentalist, Thug ass in Agra.

We looked at each other in full costume and were pleased with what we saw. It was an almost surreal and narcissistic experience. Kali looked particularly winsome. I think that meant hot in English, but I wasn't sure since words could be so damn vague at times. Regardless, these tribesmen (and woman) were ready to hunt and gather. We were prepared to ride into the Indian sunset while listening to the steady rhythms of America the Beautiful. God help the Islamic cowboys who might cross our warpath.

Sometimes those who served and protected went forth to safeguard their mom's warm apple pie from ravenous, sticky-fingered heathens.

Chapter 18

Get Along Little Doggies

It was roundup time for Kris Amar and his gang of Thugs. His days of hustling and rustling the offspring of prominent people were quickly coming to a close. I was already planning his necktie party, something tightly befitting for the miserable bastard. There was no need to RSVP with this hangman since I had planned the event to be open to one and all. Please bring your popcorn and cameras and watch Kris squirm by my righteous hand. I promised it would be a good performance at breakneck speed with a happy, predictable ending. Richard Avery was going to throw the scaffolding's lever and watch Kris Amar twist and dangle on the rope of American retribution and justice.

The scene and purple prose simply didn't get any more colorful or satisfying for those who served and protected.

Ok, so much for the verbal bravado and posturing. I only hoped I wouldn't get killed trying to rescue Zeenat. I also hoped that no one else on my team would be harmed either since I had come to like and respect each of them. They were almost friends in addition to being colleagues. I didn't want to feel that way because it was often a serious liability in my business. It was sometimes better to keep a safe distance, emotionally speaking.

We grouped at the Holiday Inn in Agra. I would have much preferred a HoJo to score reward points, but I sacrificed my personal gain once again for my government. Not to mention there wasn't a single HoJo in the entire country. The P-LINT indicated that Kris Amar's jacket was inside the mosque on the Taj's

grounds. The ersatz Indians were ready to go on the warpath and it was time to vamoose. We double-checked each other's costumes for authenticity and modesty. We then loaded and locked our weapons. That expression had always confused me since my Smith was a simple, five-shot revolver that was always locked and loaded, but hitting anything more than 15 feet away was problematic though. Regardless, I liked the manly sound of it.

We looked like a bunch of deranged circus clowns who had just escaped the asylum. That family snapshot should keep the opposition off-balance and guessing for a while, I suspected. Chester had arranged for a plainclothes, undercover team of IB agents to take up positions at the outer perimeter of the mosque. However, I insisted that each agent wear large "IB" letters on the back of their shirts and jackets so we could distinguish the good Indians from the bad ones. Of course, the only good ones were dead ones, I gravely snickered.

We piled into an electric van that drove us to the entrance to the Taj Mahal. Due to pollution concerns, gas and diesel powered vehicles were banned in the immediate vicinity of the World Heritage site. The Taj was about the only place in India with clean air and we all breathed deeply and hoped it wouldn't be our last. We stood in line several minutes waiting to buy admission tickets. Thank God Chester had remembered to bring some money. None of our costumes had pockets, although we likely would have been shortchanged, regardless.

Chester used a small pouch sewn into the bottom of his quiver to keep his wampum safe. He was a clever Indian and straight arrow. I hoped he'd be a straight shooter too, I aimlessly mused. As I had correctly guessed, our outfits didn't draw too many second glances. There were a lot of belly laughs and guffaws, but few second glances. We felt confident that we had chosen the

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perfect guises to pull off this dangerous caper and we were now dressed to kill.

The mosque was open to the public and there were already a fair number of people on the premises. Fortunately, we didn't have to remove our shoes since they were already properly covered with our paper bootie moccasins. It wasn't a Friday, but the place still had a surprisingly large number of worshipers and tourists mingling about. That was good since we had forgotten to bring our armored vests. We might have to use the good folk as human shields if push came to shove. Given the circumstances, we thought it was a good defensive maneuver and classic tradecraft by exploiting the weak and using them for our own ends.

We had a solid plan and strategy. We only prayed that our sly and clever tactics would work well. If not, we'd all end up as infidel martyrs for Uncle Sam. In this ruse, we planned to use our State Department issued guile and cunning to bring about a successful conclusion. Those commodities were always in short supply and were sparingly doled out. Nonetheless, we would set into motion a classic hostage-taking scenario to smoke-out the bad guys and rescue Zeenat. It was a brilliant bit of strategic thinking, but the prospect frightened me to death.

The mosque was good-sized, about five thousand square-feet by my rule-of-thumb. I could be wrong because the building was round and not square. It was also probably designed in meters, rather than feet, so guesstimating its size and volume was difficult. Not surprisingly, the ground floor was rotund and largely open from roof to floor. We could see a series of rooms on its upper floor, but the stairs leading to them were roped off to keep people away from the building's only restroom. The mosque's imams could be so stingy and incontinent at times.

As we moved about, we clicked and clacked instructions to each other using our frogs. Some people reacted to the sounds by mentioning the cricket problem in India since the Agra team wasn't playing very well this season. Our plan was simple, but elegant in design. Big Bird would create a diversion by doing a war-dance in the middle of the mosque. He would mentally and silently use the beats and lyrics from Billy Idol's song White Wedding to motivate him. He claimed he could go a full five minutes and twenty seconds without stopping before changing his head's CD. I told him to give it his best shot. God, I really admired our team's spirit and natural rhythm.

The plan called for the Bird to create enough commotion to draw the attention of the bad guys. We knew Indians couldn't resist watching traditional, ancestral dances. However, he had to make sure he didn't go too long or far in the effort. We couldn't afford to be deluged by either too much rain or corn at a time like this. The Bird started his dance in earnest by whooping, hollering, and prancing around the temple; all to the amazement of the onlookers. He put his hand to his mouth to make the most ridiculous and disgusting grunting, hollering, and guttural sounds. Some of them could have been misconstrued as being obscene. That was the Billy Idol influence, I firmly believed. At one point, he did the YMCA song and tried to get people from the audience to participate. However, he ended up a letter short. But YMC was close though. In any case, I'd still give him an A for effort.

The ruse worked. A couple of Thugs came down the stairs to see what was going on. They were amused and confused by the Birdman's performance. Of course, that was the whole point of the exercise. While they looked on, Kali and I made for the stairs. We quietly and carefully began searching the rooms on the upper

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floor. As we opened the door to the third room, we were greeted by a Thug carrying an Uzi submachine pistol.

He turned it toward our direction and the move was a big mistake on his part. Kali immediately fired two shots from her Sig pistol and brought the Thug down with big bangs to his upper chest; nine millimeter ones to be exact. I was awestruck and thoroughly impressed with her shooting skills. Princess Summer-Fall-Winter-Spring was a crack shot and a stone-cold killer. I think she actually enjoyed it, but didn't say so.

Crying at the far end of the room was Zeenat Karzai. She was obviously alive and kicking which was a very good sign. We'd worry about her psychological scars later, but now she was in safe hands. We noticed that Zeenat was also well-dressed for a captive. She had a Giorgio Armani suit jacket draped around her shoulders, but its owner, Kris Amar, was nowhere to be found.

After Big Bird finished his impromptu dancing, we still had to keep the bad guys' attention away from the upstairs room and that was where Chester came into play. When the Bird stopped his little shtick, Chester started his diversion. He pulled out his pistol and announced to the crowd that he was a dangerous terrorist who was going to take someone hostage until his demands for Sikh autonomy for Kashmir were met.

Chester claimed he wasn't seeking anything more. I enjoyed his little attempt at humor. Regardless, he was desperate and ruthless and would die before giving up his cause. Chester even went so far as to threaten to cut off the world's supply of fine sweaters and scarves. He said he hoped that he wouldn't have to permanently pull the wool over anyone's eyes to get his way.

The wannabe terrorist then carefully chose his first, and only, hostage. It turned out to be an Indian man who stood very close to him—Chester himself.

He placed the muzzle of his gun against his right temple as we had practiced. We had timed how long he could hold the weapon in that position before his hand tired and he had to lower it. Eight minutes and ten seconds was clocked as his personal best.

The first thing he yelled to the congregation was to stand still or he would shoot. He wanted to get their attention in order to exercise control over them. His threat seemed to work since the crowd stood their ground and watched this most bizarre scene being played out in front of them. Mothers quickly put their hands over their children's eyes to shield them from the gruesome spectacle. Strong men openly wept with laughter. It was quite a sight to behold and a great performance by Chester.

He ordered the crowd to divide into two, roughly equal groups of men and women. That was an easy demand since Muslim men were physically separated from their wives while inside the mosques for religious reasons. Each group was then told to line up against an opposing wall. They needed to move quickly or he would make good on his promise. "Move it or lose it," he screamed at them in both Hindi and English. They now had their collective backs against the walls which was a direct affront to their dignities.

He instructed the two lines to slowly approach each other at midpoint of the mosque's floor. The two groups were told to stand about ten feet apart, facing each other. He then ordered everyone to put their right hand in and then to pull it out. He ordered them to put it in again and shake it all about.

"You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about!" he sternly chided. He went through all seven verses of the ditty, but had to change butt to derriere for the sake of propriety and the French tourists in the crowd. The people were enthralled with the mysterious ritual and the chanting of its

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moving words. Chester's guidance and cadence were superb and on the mark and the group's movements and symmetries were wonderful to watch. The crowd loudly applauded his lively performance. Chester wondered if they might be up for a little square dancing afterward.

Sometimes those who served and protected liked to shake a little booty in church.

That playful dance took about ten minutes to complete and kept everyone's attention focused on Chester. That was everyone except for the two Thugs who must have had two impatient, left feet and disdained childish music. One of the team members downstairs gave us the warning whistle of imminent danger. The two bad guys were now heading in our direction. We were expecting this move and had planned accordingly. Kali had placed a small prayer rug in the hallway and took her position on it while facing Mecca which more-or-less coincided with the direction of the bad guys approach. Well, she actually faced the opposite direction, but neither of us gave a damn, although we would do penance later for our misdirected sins. Kali kept her Sig semiautomatic beneath the rug and at the ready. Her trigger finger must have been itching like crazy.

The two goons walked down the hallway toward the room with their guns drawn. They weren't taking any chances and neither were we. Kali dropped the second Thug just before he followed his partner into the room. One quick DS cap to the head brought him down as she couldn't miss from 30 feet. She now had another trophy to put on the wall of her rumpus room back home. But I didn't have it so easy. Zaneet's safety was a concern, but guns do kill, despite the NRA's claims to the contrary. I had to be damn careful if I fired my weapon in the small room. I stood behind the door and grabbed the Thug from behind. I would apply his own,

peculiar weapon of choice to this assassin. It was a customary act under the circumstances.

I had removed Zeenat's bra and twisted it into a makeshift garrote. As a considerate gentleman, I had averted my eyes when doing so. She had a perky set, by the way. I looped her B-cups around the Thug's neck and held on for dear life. Choking someone to death, who didn't want to be choked, was difficult under the best of conditions. Kali joined me and we both held the bad guy down on the floor until his last breath left him. Zeenat was screaming in the far corner of the room. We understood her anguish, but wet work was never pleasant, especially during the Indian rainy season.

We collected ourselves and headed to the airport. The embassy had chartered a small business jet to return us to Delhi. Zeenat was terribly traumatized by her experience. That was certainly to be expected and I felt sorry for her, but knew she would eventually be able to cope with her experience. She simply needed support and time to recover.

We had done well and the proof was Zeenat's safe return home. However, we had missed nailing Kris Amar again. This was now getting personal for me. I wouldn't rest until Kris moved onto his next life. And it would be a grudge match to the death.

Sometimes those who served and protected fundamentally detested those extremist bullies who terrorized others of this world.

Chapter 19

Tying Up Loose Ends

Kris Amar, wherefore art thou? I asked myself. Where were you, my nemesis, my foe, my archenemy and my ultimate destiny? I was obsessed with the thought that we were both still breathing the same air in the same country since it was terribly polluted and I fretted about my health. Regardless, one of us had to die to balance the karmic books. There was no longer any middle ground or room for compromise. It would come down to the best or luckiest man standing when next we would meet. The die was cast and I couldn't wait for the showdown between us. It would be a contest of good versus evil. It would be Uncle Sam fighting against a foreign, godless, heathen, religious fanatic.

Kris would battle an American atheist. The symbolism would be powerful and symbolic too. It was now "do or die" time and I liked the sound of the bravado, but I certainly didn't want to die by his hand. Moreover, I admitted to myself that I was scared shitless at the prospect of meeting him again. To me, Kris Amar was death personified to the power of ten. He was Mega Death with a scythe shaped like a long, sharp kris.

Zeenat Karzai was escorted back to Kabul by her Afghan security guard, Kamal Barbak. She was now safe at home under the redoubled protection of the APPF. She'd recover from her ordeal with time. She was young so her traumatic, psychological wounds would eventually heal with few noticeable scars. Alicia Thurman didn't appear to be suffering any post-traumatic stress whatsoever. She still chewed me out every time I saw her. Jesus,

she had a mouth on her that a sailor would either be ashamed or proud of. She'd make a good Foreign Service officer, I thought. She could kibitz and cuss with the best of them.

I was depressed even though things had gone well. Washington was pleased and had been generously dispensing accolades to all concerned. Jersey Briggs had garnered many undeserved kudos by this time. Everyone liked a winner and I even had a few thrown my way, but I was much less enthused with the attaboys. I needed to even the score with Kris Amar and this time it was very personal. Dick Avery was putting it all on the line for God and country. Bring it on my friend. I am DS Special Agent Richard Avery, Uncle Sam, Miss Liberty, motherhood, John Wayne, McDonald's, and the Stars and Stripes rolled into one powerful, non-gender-biased persona!

I waited patiently for Kris Amar to call me. I knew he would because we were two of a kind from different sides of the same obsessive coin (or two compulsive peas in a pod, if you were a Vegan.) He couldn't let go of the ego challenge and animus and neither could I. It would be a fight to the death and one of us was going to get hurt!

Kris finally called my cell phone while I was sleeping. It was my nap time at the hotel and I was grumpy. He was always looking for an advantage, an edge. His words were brief and to the point, challenging and arrogant as well. I was to meet him at the Akshardham Temple in New Delhi. He cheekily offered a duel at dawn, figuratively speaking. More of that Hindu duality, I thought. He actually challenged me to a contest—mano-a-mano. I told him I'd never heard of the game and that he'd have to explain its purpose and rules before I would agree to anything. That was only fair play, I reasoned. He said I should come alone if I had any stones. I had stones, but no balls at the moment; however, I'd still

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play along with his little game of death. I still needed to get my rocks off with this Thug.

Kris was a dramatist who appreciated the irony of the situation. He also was someone who no longer cared about his causes or personal safety and that made him especially dangerous. In his mind, he had nothing to lose. However, I had much to lose. I still enjoyed the booze and fast women too much to give them up just yet. I thought I still had a few more viable years of debauchery left in me. I planned to enjoy my twilight, golden years, come Hell or high water or Kris Amar.

We were to meet in the vestibule at the main entrance to the Akshardham Temple. The Hindu temple was the largest in the world. In other words, it was religiously humongous. The main building of the complex was one hundred and forty-one feet high and designed according to ancient Vedic texts. Its footprint was 86,342 square feet. It was a new structure, having been constructed in 2005. It was built entirely of pink sandstone and Italian Carrera marble and it featured no steel or concrete foundation or superstructure. In addition, it took 11,000 artisans and volunteers five years to construct the temple so it was a labor of obsessive, karmic love.

Like the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort, the Akshardham complex abutted the Yamuna River. Kris obviously had a thing about rivers and water, more watered-down religious symbolism I believed. In any case, it would be the venue for our meeting. This would be our high noon at 9 o'clock sharp the following morning. I told Kris to be on time since I had a busy schedule and didn't want to be late for my own funeral. For a white dude, I had a good sense of black humor, I mused.

When we met, we didn't bother to shake hands. The obvious slight-of-hand wasn't overly rude under the circumstances. Before

he could say a word, I flat-out informed Kris that I wouldn't play mano-a-mano with him because I didn't understand the game, having never played it before. I suggested we pick a game that we both knew and felt comfortable with. It was only sporting.

We haggled over several games, but couldn't agree on one. However, we did agree on using rock, paper, and scissors to settle the matter and the winner would get to choose the game. On the count of three, we thrust our hands in front of us. Mine was open and his was closed. My paper trumped his rock so I got to choose.

It would be hide and seek and I would be "It." Okay, I admitted it wasn't a Sikh temple, but it was damn close. I would be the hunter, the searcher, the destroyer of Kris Amar in the Akshardham Temple. More likely, I would be the confused rat caught in a huge maze.

After going over the ground rules for a couple of minutes, we started the game. It would be a game to the finish and we both knew it. There would be no quarter or mercy given by either contestant. I closed my eyes and counted to sixty as agreed. "One Mississippi—two Mississippi—three Mississippi..." I silently counted so I wouldn't draw undue attention from the other visitors or temple staff. Ready or not, here I come, I shouted loudly to myself.

The temple was divided into distinct exhibition halls. I entered Hall I named Sahajanand Pradarshan. It featured life-like robotics and dioramas depicting the life and deeds of the sect's founder—Bhagwan Swami. I kept my hand close to my Smith Sixty in the pocket of my leisure suit. It was the forest green one that had always brought me good luck in the past. I wasn't out of the woods yet and needed all the luck I could get. I wondered if it still had any Mojo left on it. I had also affixed a silencer to my gun this time. Like the Boy Scouts of America, "Be prepared" was my

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personal motto and watchwords. Those were words to live by rather than to die for I prayed.

I skulked and skedaddled around the huge room acting like a normal, American tourist: loud, rude, and obnoxious. I couldn't have picked a better or more convincing role to play since no one paid me any attention. I was like the Invisible Man, but even more transparent. However, I didn't see or detect or sense hide or hair of Kris. He was exercising his own disappearing act, I suspected.

I moved onto the second exhibition hall. This one was called Nilkanth Kaylan Yatra—meaning something in Hindi. It housed Delhi's first, and only, IMAX, big screen theater. The theater continuously showed a movie of Bhagwan Swami's journey across the length and breadth of India as a teenager. Not surprisingly, it was now showing the film. I paid the admission and took a seat at the back of the auditorium. Before my eyes could adjust to the darkness, I was pulled from my seat and thrown to the floor. It was Kris who obviously had seen the movie Pearl Harbor—probably several times over. He had likely sneaked into the movie theater to watch the film too. Regardless, he was one, bad Indian kamikaze in this film noir.

Speaking of sneaky, he had snuck up on me in the darkness when I was most vulnerable. My eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the darkness. We rocked and rolled for a few seconds while he tried to choke the living daylights out of me. As we scuffled, I was able to pull my gun. He saw I now had the advantage and ran for the door. Just outside, I put a round through his right temple from about ten feet. It was a fitting end and locale for Mr. Kris Amar: the Death Master of Banaras!

His blood and brain matter exploded across a beautiful wall frieze of Hindu gods and goddesses frolicking in heaven or wherever. No matter, the gore would quickly freeze dry into its

own mosaic. However, I would need to get my wingtips cleaned and shined later. Image, rather than substance, was always valued in the department. I rolled him over and found that it wasn't Kris after all. To my surprise, it was Joe Singh Singh; the former embassy driver, thug, and Islamic extremist. His identity was easy to confirm since the missing tip of his middle finger was a dead giveaway. He was dressed in clothes similar to Kris Amar's. I strongly suspected that Kris wasn't playing the game by Hoyle or Dick and wondered how many other guests he had invited to our little party. No one was going to pin the tail on this donkey if I had anything to say about it!

I had to quickly leave the building because I needed to clear my head and get a breath of fresh air. I exited the main complex building and walked into the Bharat Upavan; a garden of lush manicured lawns, trees, and shrubs. It was dotted with bronze sculptures of Indian culture. I took a deep breath and hoped I wouldn't hyperventilate. I sat down on a bench and smoked a cigarette to calm my nerves. I had almost bought the bullet—I meant the noose, just a minute ago. I was shaken and shaking from the close call with death.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Kris trying to conceal himself behind a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. I guessed my quick departure from the temple building surprised him a bit. I think he was waiting outside all along to ambush me when I left the building, assuming Joe Singh didn't nail me inside first. I had upset his plans, but I didn't intend to apologize for my gaffe. I sat looking forward, pretending I hadn't seen him. I had a second cigarette and watched for his next move. I kept Ms. Smith at the ready just in case. He started circling my position at a distance to get behind me, but I stayed still and finished smoking. He planned to attack me from behind—the favorite position for cowards of all

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fanatic religious stripes and persuasions. Why couldn't we simply duke it out, man-to-man, as John Wayne might say?

My peripheral vision only went so far and so did Kris Amar's image because he was now in my blind spot. I surreptitiously removed a small mirror from my trouser pocket. It was called a pocket mirror for good reason and I carried it for occasions just like this one. It was an invaluable tool because it provided for perfect hindsight. I cautiously scanned behind me for a sign of Kris. I eventually caught his image and followed his every move. He was slinking toward me like a panther stalking its prey. More to the point, he was carrying a long kris in his right hand. A fatal thrust from Kris's kris was to be my fate, if he had his way. For Christ's sake, he wouldn't take me down that easily, I swore to myself.

Just as Kris was about to pounce, I got up from the bench and turned to him with my gun drawn. He was totally surprised by my quick actions and ran toward the bronze statue of Mr. Gandhi. He acted like a miserable coward by refusing to engage my small gun with his large knife. Where were all the strong, brave men these days? I didn't know because DS had imposed a hiring freeze much earlier. At this point, I was seriously pumped and out for blood. I fired several rounds at Kris as he escaped through the garden's flora. I heard a couple of loud dings from the bullets striking the statue. I had winged him in the right arm—Gandhi, I meant.

I knew I couldn't catch Kris given his head start, but I could do the next best thing. I calmly walked up to Mahatma Gandhi and put my wheel-gun to his head.

“Okay motherfucker, where did he go?” I screamed. “You're supposed to be all-knowing and wise so tell me where the hell he went or I'll blow your goddamn head off!”

I had almost pulled the trigger, but gathered my wits instead. I was out of control and my target acquisition system had gone haywire.

I think it must have been the fourth cigarette that put me over the top instead of forgetting to take my meds again. In any case, I sat next to the statue to regain my composure. As I sat, I had an epiphany. I hadn't had one of her since my last lap dance at that DC strip club where I got shit-faced and drunk. Then it happened. I thought Mahatma Gandhi was speaking, in sotto voce, to me and in English, no less. I knew I must have been hallucinating, but I still listened intently to his sage words.

"Dick, you're fucked-up in the head, man. I don't know how to put it to you any other way," the statue spoke. "You need to get with the program, Pilgrim," the voice bluntly told me.

Jesus, it wasn't Gandhi—it was my hero John Wayne! I had to come to India to meet my mentor and guru. I was on cloud nine and could barely contain myself.

"John, what's the program I should get with?" I eagerly asked him.

"Pardner, you're wasting your time and talents going after these terrorists. Trust me, somebody else will bring them to ground eventually. Don't worry, they'll get their comeuppance. Dick, you don't have to be a hero all the time. You have another, greater mission in this life—one much more important than what you're doing now."

"You mean like playing cowboys and Indians with the bad guys?" I cautiously asked.

"No, I don't mean Indians, cowboys maybe, but not Indians," he replied with a manly twang in his voice. "You need to return to Washington and fight the real bad guys who threaten our nation."

"You mean like the Mafia, or the KKK, or the Mormons?"

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“No, you ignorant dick,” he harshly chided me. “It’s the State Department and federal bureaucracy in Washington that needs a good kick in the ass. They’re the ones who have contributed to the foreign policy mess we’re now in around the world. In the world’s eyes, America’s credibility is at its lowest point in a generation due to their shenanigans. It’s time to stand up and defend truth, justice, and the American way. Also, tell them they need to rethink our nation’s war on terrorism. Our foreign affairs and counterterrorism policies and programs are intertwined and not well managed at the moment. It’s not too late to do the right thing and return to the principles and values our country once believed in and promoted around the world. Go undercover and work from inside of the establishment to do what’s right for America. Fight for what’s good, honorable, and just for our country and its citizens.”

Like in Washington, my epiphany had a happy ending and my life’s mission had just begun. God bless America, I thought. I now had a new cause célèbre and a worthy enemy to battle and defeat; the mindless, disingenuous foreign affairs politicians. The Black Dragons of the foreign affairs establishment better watch out because a righteous dragon slayer wearing a leisure suit and smoking Marlboros was about to pay them a visit!

Jersey Briggs was already threatening to cut me off at the trough. He didn’t care if I found Kris Amar or not. It simply didn’t matter because he was off the hook with his bosses. That was all that counted with him. He told me to pack my bags and myself and return to Washington—ASAP.

My job was finished here despite Jersey’s feeble attempt to placate me by mentioning that his budget was tight and he needed

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the federal bucks for other investigations. He said it wasn't anything personal.

Sure thing, Jersey, I thought. I was no longer serving a useful purpose and was now a liability in your eyes. I was merely expendable cannon fodder in America's war on terrorism. Thanks buddy.

I booked a flight home, but before I left I had to say my goodbyes to the team. I was proud of them and our accomplishments. I would recommend each of them for a department award and cash bonus. Snagging Kris Amar would have been another sort of bonus. Maybe some other time and place, I thought. There was still bad blood between us that had to be eventually drawn. Happy trails to you until we meet again, I repeatedly hummed in my fuzzy mind.

I had to catch my flight. However, before heading to the airport, I went to the embassy to collect my papers and pouch my Smith home. It was early morning and a Marine security guard was raising Old Glory as I exited the chancery. I stood at attention and placed my hand over my heart. It was still beating and that was an encouraging sign at my age.

I watched as our nation's flag was raised to full staff. My eyes watered a bit from Delhi's early morning pollution. Despite being a dick, I was proud to be an American Dick. I was raring to go home to the land of the free and brave. I already had plans for another hostage rescue mission. But this time to save the United States from the barbarians already inside our nation's gates.

I had a final cigarette before getting into the embassy car. Why couldn't I kick this nasty, compulsive habit, I wondered? I was a strong, proud American who could overcome most of life's hardships and adversities. I was a tough cookie who didn't crumble when it came right down to it. As we pulled down the

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driveway, I tossed my box of Marlboro reds out the window. There, I triumphantly said to myself. I had quit forever. Damn, I knew I could do it!

A second later, I tapped the driver on the shoulder and told him to stop the car. I walked back to collect my Marlboros. Littering was an especially impolite and discourteous act as we all knew. As a special agent of the Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State, United States of America, I must set a good example for others with less willpower and intestinal fortitude.

Sometimes those who served and protected were simply eco-friendly neat freaks and unrepentant Dicks.

About the Author



George received a BA degree in English from Northern Illinois University. He then had a 49 year career in investigations, law enforcement and security in the US and abroad (private investigator, DOD security specialist, senior special agent Diplomatic Security Service US State Department, World Bank security consultant, Vice President Corporate Security for NASD, Security Director for Salliemae, independent security consultant). It's fairly easy to see from here, where Richard Avery comes into the picture. You can try to keep up with both of them at: www.dickavery.net



My nom de guerre is Richard Avery, though I'm old enough that my nickname as a kid was and still is Dick, so I've given it to the "character" Dick Avery, and I am a retired special agent of the U.S. State Department's Diplomatic Security Service or simply DSS, if you prefer. I'll leave out the plenipotentiary and

extraordinary accolades that go along with the title because there aren't any. I was just one more bureaucrat among many who served their career sentences in the sideshow called the Foreign Service. What's the old quip? "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. Those who can't teach join the federal government." Yep, that's me alright and I'm damn proud of it!

A note from Tell-Tale:

Okay, we admit Dick's not the most politically correct agent alive, and he sometimes bumbles and reminds us of what happens when you cross a certain French Inspector with a British Legume to produce an American Dick, but you have to admit that he's as cute as a pink Rottweiler when he's on the scent of a good case! Who says you can't teach an ole dog new tricks?



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