

THE 56TH MAN

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ONE

Baghdad, March 27, 2003

The storm receded in the distance, as all storms did. The boy was protected, even coddled. He did not comprehend that this storm, like all the others over the last week, was unseasonal. But he knew few things this thunderous ended abruptly. They faded off, as though the events themselves were aware of their majesty and were reluctant to end the proceedings. Like his father's wrath, which tended to decline into dark mutterings. There was no specific end to his anger; only when a tentative smile flickered across his stern face did the boy know that sweet reason was finally breaking through, however slowly.

But his father was not here now, nor his big brother. They had both been wearing uniforms when they left, leaving him and the middle brother and their mother to huddle in the basement while the storm broke overhead. The biggest storm the boy had ever experienced, big enough to shudder their bones and draw low cries of fear from their compressed lips. It would have been reassuring if his father had been with them. The boy would not have even minded if his father had cried out with the rest of them--though

such a reaction was unlikely.

But now the storm was receding and the boy grew fidgety. He tried to pull away from his mother, who kept him in place with a strong hand.

"Qasim," she commanded her middle son. "Go up and see. And be careful!"

The younger boy fumed as his brother went upstairs. He was more unwilling than unable to understand why he should not take charge of his own destiny.

"Ummi," he complained, squirming.

His mother's grip tightened. "Be still!" She hearkened to her middle son's footsteps overhead. Her mind had become a listening post, her dread a trembling sentry.

The boy hated the cramped basement, so full of family treasures that there was scarcely room for the three of them. Was that why his father and eldest brother had left? Because they would not have been able to squeeze themselves between the antique vases and statuary that they had moved downstairs throughout the previous week? And what was in those crates over in the corner? They had been unloaded from army trucks and carried here by soldiers who had brushed aside his parents' protests with curious indifference. Other men in uniform were highly deferential to the boy's father. But not these. This lack of respect bothered the youngest son. The soldiers laughed idiotically when he openly snubbed them. After they left, the boy was threatened with severe punishment if he went near the crates.

And now they were not ten feet away from him.

The boy stopped fidgeting. "Ummi, I don't hear--"

The door at the top of the stairs.

"You can come up, now," Qasim called to them. "They're gone, for now."

Still holding his hand, the boy's mother rose, lifting him to his feet, and led him up.

"Aoothoo billahi meen ash-shaytan ar-rajeem," the boy's mother murmured. The boy was startled. She was asking for Allah's protection against the accursed Satan. Not typical language in this household.

The boy was intrigued by glass strewn across the front room. Where had it come from? Ah...the picture window. Smashed to smithereens! If he had done that...kicked his ball the wrong way while playing in the yard...he would have feared for his very life. But there was no one here to punish. It seemed to have exploded all by itself, on its very own. How could such a thing happen?

"That's the only damage, Subhan Allah," said Qasim. "We're very lucky."

"Lucky!" his mother scoffed. "This is punishment. No one else has a window like this, where everyone can see in. Lucky!" She paused, looking lost as she stared at the vacant window. "It's your father's...he never went to the mosque...mocked the imam's...he was never a believer...he never bowed his head... Astaghfirullah. Astaghfirullah. Astaghfirullah..."

I ask Allah forgiveness. This was something you said when you feared going to Jahannam, Hell. And an especially horrible fate awaited unbelievers, who would not be rescued from their torments on Judgment Day: Qiyamat.

She seemed to the boy to be saying that, one way or another, they would all spend eternity eating Zaqqum thorns, and they had Baba to blame for it. Were things really that bad? Wanting to judge this gloomy assessment for himself, the boy strained towards the back door. Certainly, his mother would not mind if he went out that way, with a high

wall and locked gate for protection. But she held onto him. He considered the practicality of a tantrum. After all, his father wasn't here.

"Get your father on the phone!"

"The phones aren't working," Qasim reasoned with his mother. The boy watched his brother's Adam's apple shuttle up and down his throat as he confronted an adversary far more tenacious than the manmade storms.

"He has a radio, doesn't he? Call him!"

Qasim walked across the broken glass to a small charger on a side table.

"The power's been off. It may not be charged. The enemy is jamming--"

"Find out!"

The middle son took the radio out of its cradle and tested the transmission button. There was a burst of static, then a smooth electric sound. He pressed the button again and spoke. He released the button. A moment later a man's voice came on. It didn't sound like the boy's father, but it was fuzzy. Hard to say. In her excitement, the boy's mother let go of him and raced across the room.

"Careful!" Qasim cautioned his mother. "Careful! It's not a toy!"

The middle son assumed the authority of an adult as he explained to his mother how to operate the radio. She stopped her frantic efforts to grab it out of his hand and listened with a show of patience, as though heeding a grown man.

The boy skipped out the back door. He was a man, too. Independent. He hopped down the steps and stopped, listening.

The walled garden seemed undisturbed by the storm--except for some unripe fruit that had fallen off the tamarind tree that spread its shade over the far corner. The boy's

mother would not be pleased by that. He had once clambered up a ladder and picked some of the fruit too early in the year. His intent was to be helpful, but his mother had berated him for the waste. The fruit was useless until it dangled in long, plump strands.

Beyond the wall pillars of smoke rose in all directions. The outside world had been churned into noisy chaos. Shouting, cries of horror, pain and astonishment. The boy thought he recognized some of the voices. Could these be his neighbors? He could not say for certain. There was a high pitch in their tone that carried the voices just beyond familiarity. And there were screams. Who could be screaming? It was confusing. The fruit had incontinently fallen, but everything else in the garden was judiciously serene. The boy felt safe, as though snuggled in a nest.

He went to the gate and peered through the bars. People were running back and forth, blindly breaking through thick feathers of smoke. They were throwing up their hands or shaking their fists at the sky. Was the sky the enemy? Had the sky broken the picture window? The boy glanced up. The air directly above the garden showed only a faint trace of smoke. But the smell was strong. He looked out again. Further up the street the haze was impenetrable. A man emerged suddenly out of the smoke, like a genie popping out of his bottle. He rubbed his eyes, then gazed about numbly, as if waking from a long nap.

The boy saw nothing aimless about the people dashing back and forth in the street. They were vibrant, and in his small lexicon of life vibrancy spelt purpose. Even moaning, like the woman who stumbled and fell to the curb, was a kind of decisiveness. She was doing something...even if he could not begin to understand what it was.

Backing away from the gate, the boy stopped midway up the path of slate

flagstones and surveyed the garden. Wasn't there something he could do? Some way that he could be useful?

The opportunity was under his nose. Of course! He would pick up the fallen tamarind fruit. That would certainly please his father and mother. Even when ripe, they never ate it. His father bemoaned the annual mess and the insects the rotting fruit attracted after it had fallen to the ground. Planted long ago by the previous owner of the house, the tree was intended to provide shade, not sustenance. The tamarind fruit the boy's family ate came from India, in a variety of forms. When his mother stormed at him last year for picking unripe buds, she must have been more concerned about the height of the ladder than the loss of foodstuff.

Dragging a reed basket out of the flowerbed, he set to work. As he gathered the fruit, he noticed some branches that had broken loose. Most of them were small, yet still too large for the basket. How should he deal with them? Pile them next to the path, perhaps, so that the gardener could scoop them up for disposal? That seemed an excellent solution. The boy was sure his father would approve.

But after several minutes spent dragging branches across the yard the true magnitude of the job revealed itself to him. There was more here than he had realized. And some of the branches were much heavier than he'd anticipated. He abandoned the pile at the base of the patio steps and returned to his original task. Let the gardener deal with the branches. The fruit was much smaller and easier to handle.

And yet, after several minutes of bending and standing, it struck him this chore was just as tiresome as dragging tree branches. He'd never known the unripened fruit to fall in such abundance. What could have caused it? He raised his eyes to the tamarind

limbs overhead. The tree looked shaggy, weather-beaten. Well, that only made sense after a storm. Especially after a storm that could shatter a picture window into a thousand fragments.

There was something stuck in the lowest fork of the tree. It looked like string or tape. Walking around to the other side, between the wall and the tree, he could make out a knob-like thing, brightly colored. Somebody's toy had been tossed by the storm from who knew where, until it had fetched up here. From what he could judge, the knob was about the size of his fist. The boy glanced about for the gardener's ladder, then paused. The last time he had dragged the ladder against the tree his mother had come roaring out like a dragon in a fairytale. It would be best not to draw attention.

He searched the garden and found a plastic crate behind the mulch pile. The bottom was latticed. He had seen the gardener use it to sift out stones and roots before casting soil and mulch on the flowerbed. It was strong, but light. Carrying it over to the tree, the boy upended the crate and planted it on the garden side of the tree. He would catch hold of the tape and drag the knobby thing down by the tail.

The tape was about six inches long and flapped temptingly against the tree as the boy stood on the crate and stretched up.

Just out of reach.

The boy sighed, looked down for a moment, then raised his head, held out his right arm as far as it would go, and gave a little jump.

Missed.

Instead of being frustrated, he was egged on by failure. He even found it amusing to miss, and began to laugh so hard that it robbed his legs of strength. His jumps failed

by an inch, then several inches. He even fell off the crate once, still laughing.

Eventually, though, the knob and tape took on the aspect of an adversary. Not an enemy, but a prize to be sought and won. His father was a stout believer in excellence. The boy had already learned that goals were not frivolous. Once your mind was set on something, you had to see it through--triumphantly. He had to get the knob. His father would be so proud.

He heard his mother calling for him. She would make him come back inside the house, and all he would have to show for his bad behavior would be a pile of branches and a reed basket half-full of unripe fruit. Perhaps she would forgive the boy if he came back with something valuable. And the only thing that looked valuable to him at the moment was the knob in the tree. He leapt again. The tips of his fingers brushed the tape.

His mother was on the back steps.

"What is that?" she cried out. "Get away from it! No! No!"

He turned and saw her racing down. The boy could not recall ever seeing her run, whether in a dress or in the slacks she was wearing now. It seemed comical--until she reached the bottom of the steps, turned past the well-trimmed bushes that ran along the base of the raised patio, and tripped on the unseen pile of branches he had so helpfully piled up along the path.

She cried out in pain as she fell, cried out again when the boy turned away from her. "No! Get away! No!"

"But Ummi...!"

He was more frightened than ever. How could he explain his actions without

showing their cause? He jumped again, missed again. Then he heard his mother's footsteps. She had freed herself of the branches and was running toward him.

"No!"

"Yes! See? It's a game! It's a prize!"

Desperation lent him strength. He jumped once more--and his fingers closed on the tape. He held on with all his might as he dropped back on the crate, pulling the tape and the knob after it. The knob got stuck, but now the boy had the tape firmly in hand.

"See! A prize!"

His mother had almost reached him when he gave the tape a violent yank.

There was an intense flash.

And then the game was suddenly and horribly over.

TWO

"Hey, don't jump man." There was a trace of sarcasm in the young man's amiability as he guided his bicycle along the curb. He was accompanied by an equally young woman. Ari thought they had the air of college students, sleek and untrammelled in their liberal arts cloud. He noted the flat rear tire of the girl's bike. Neither of them had thought to bring a hand pump. Cycling was not the primary means of transportation in this country. Not yet, at least.

Ari smiled in response to the young man's quip. "It would never occur to me to jump without taking someone with me."

They paused, hesitating to pass him. At a rest stop on the Jersey Turnpike, the pump attendant had shot him an unfiltered scowl through the windshield--a clear reaction to his OPEC complexion. Perhaps this was due to the price of gas. But the young cyclist didn't have the look of someone with the courage of his prejudices. Perhaps Ari should not have made the inflammatory remark. But there it was.

The young man nodded at the girl and they pushed their bikes around the parked car, away from Ari and the bridge rail.

"You're blocking the bike path, man," the young man said over his shoulder as they walked away.

Ari studied the white line that demarked a narrow lane the length of the bridge. A bike path? He had thought it was a parking lane. Where he came from bicycles were an integral part of the traffic pattern, not segregated to the side.

Bracing his back against his car, he propped his feet on the narrow concrete

sidewalk and gazed out at the James River. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a map of Richmond. He quickly pinpointed his location, then traced the line that had been marked out for him. He estimated he was still several miles from his destination. He refolded the map and returned it to his pocket. He stared out at the river a little longer, taking note of people far below, jumping from boulder to boulder like gnats on dirty soap bubbles. Then he hunched back to his feet and turned. And frowned. The car was a Scion xB. Ari had seen dilapidated heaps drawn by donkeys with more flair.

Riverside Drive was a narrow lane that squirted in and out of every cove and cranny on the south bank of the James. Ari drove at what he considered a perfectly normal speed, leaving a trail of swearing cyclists, who used the road to access the state park. After passing an apartment complex near the bridge exit, he saw nothing but residential housing on the bluffs overlooking the river. It was a sedate, older neighborhood, with chrysanthemums, asters and dahlias draped down the slopes like tossed bouquets. Across the road a chain of black-eyed Susans were like token charms on the forest that shackled the river.

He crossed Huguenot Road, collecting one or two irate honks from drivers coming up from the toll bridge. To him, that too was part of a normal traffic pattern.

Riverside continued, sloping down until it passed another park entrance, then flattening along a field that was nearly level with the river. Traffic signs advised Ari that there were pedestrians in the area and that the speed limit was 20 miles per hour. He found them nonsensical--both the limit and the pedestrians, some of whom flagged at him

with their arms. Slow down? Why? This was a nice, clear stretch.

The road turned away from the river briefly. He stopped to check the nearest house number. Getting close.

He took the next curve slowly, keeping half an eye on the addresses. The houses here were larger, with thick borders of hedges and trees, imparting privacy and a sense of country living. He was approaching the river again. He made a right at Beach Court Lane and drove past a man sweeping a wand-like instrument back and forth at the edge of his yard. The man glanced up. Ari suspected traffic was not that uncommon here, but not that common, either.

He stopped at the next house. The number on the mailbox matched the one handwritten on the map. Someone had slapped a SOLD sticker across the FOR SALE sign out front. If there was a mistake, or a misjudgment, it was not his. Two bouquets of mixed flowers lay on the ground on either side of the mailbox post. Ari smirked. Was he being welcomed?

He hesitated pulling into the driveway, instinctively unwilling to stamp it with the burden of ownership. He switched off the engine, got out, and strolled a half dozen yards before stopping. Beach Court ended in a narrow turn-around a stone's throw from the James. A large patch of woods blocked all view of Riverside Drive and the houses further up the hill. All Ari could see of his immediate neighbors were two mailboxes on either side of Beach Court Lane. The man trimming his yard was invisible.

From the front, which faced the river, the house looked deceptively like a split-level rancher. A slight architectural variation became apparent from the road. The garage was tucked into the side. It was much lower than the front lawn, which dropped

sharply to come level with the driveway. The bottom story cut through a small hill, perhaps part of an ancient embankment.

He stepped out onto the immaculate lawn, which swept downward to a narrow beach where several ducks were taking refuge from the rapids downriver. A gazebo, raised on a brick foundation against the threat of floods, provided an outpost of calm near the water's edge. The decorative bushes that dotted the yard were trimmed to an almost unnatural perfection. The real estate people must have hired a professional landscaper to maintain the yard.

The slate roof imparted an expensive patina, while little rustic touches contributed to the air of discreetly advertised wealth. He could just glimpse another house about fifty yards up the river.

He circled around the side, where the true size of the house was revealed--two floors and a basement--and stutter-stepped down a sharp slope to a patio. From this angle, the trees in the back loomed up like deep forest. Taking out a set of three keys, he judged which would most likely fit in the sliding glass door facing the patio and inserted it. He slid the door open and entered.

His shoes clicked on the highly polished tile floor as he crossed to the center of the room. After standing silently for a minute, listening, he called out, "Hello!" He did not expect an answer. He was testing the acoustics, which responded with a muted, hollow echo. He was drawn to a humming sound from behind a pinewood door. Opening it, he discovered a water heater, its PVC piping disappearing into the wall. There was also a washer and dryer.

Returning to the center of the basement, he reflected on its emptiness. This must

have been the rec room. Four indentations in the tiles suggested a pool table. Perhaps there had been a dart board at that wood-pasted hole in the walnut paneling. This would have been an ideal place for children during winter days, isolated as it was from the rest of the house, from parents.

He found the stairs. Swinging open the door at the top, he found himself in a short hall leading to the kitchen. The stove was set against the wall, underneath a row of cabinets. Pots and cooking utensils dangled from a wide brass ring overhead. Plastic shopping bags were strewn across the counter. Ari glanced into several of them, frowned, then turned his back on the counter. He opened the refrigerator. The top shelf was stocked, the lower shelves were empty.

He toured the rest of the first floor. No carpets, not a single stick of furniture beyond the kitchen's small round table and its two ladderback chairs. Nothing but dark olive window curtains to absorb the hollow echoes of his footsteps. In the front room he pulled back the curtain on the picture window for an unobstructed view of the gazebo and the river.

Upstairs was a little more interesting. The bedrooms were without beds, but there was a computer in what Ari presumed had been the home office, or perhaps some kind of studio. Although the windows here were covered with the same thick fabric, a skylight removed the somber darkness. The computer table and chair was the only furniture he had seen outside the kitchen. A cable ran from the wall to the mini tower. Nothing wireless. He sat in the chair and switched on the computer. It booted up quickly, opening onto a screen requesting the user name and password. Ari took out his wallet and removed a slip of paper. He studied the paper, brooded a moment, then returned it to

the wallet. He switched off the computer.

A closet in the upstairs hall contained towels and wash cloths. In the bathroom was a bottle of shampoo, a can of shaving cream, a disposable razor and a bar of soap still in its wrapper.

He was back downstairs, looking out the picture window, when he heard a car door slam shut. Leaning forward, he could just make out the road and the entrance to the driveway. A police cruiser had pulled up behind his Scion. An officer had gotten out on the passenger side and was approaching the box-shaped car. He peered inside. Ari clearly heard his one-word shout:

"Suitcase!"

The driver of the prowler car got out and looked up at the house. Ari did not move away from the window. He was certain he could not be seen from that angle, with the sun reflecting off the glass. Without thinking, he reached across his stomach with his right arm and gripped the left side of his belt. When he noticed what he had done he smiled grimly.

The driver studied the SOLD sticker, then said something to his partner, who shrugged and shook his head, Ari thought, in disgust. He came back to the cruiser and removed a small wreath from the rear seat. He came around and placed it against the mailbox post. The driver seemed to find something aesthetically awkward about the placement and crouched down to align the two bouquets on either side of the wreath. Then he stood and returned his gaze up the hill. His partner said something and he shook his head. Sorrowfully, perhaps.

Both officers got back into the cruiser. Slowly, they circled the turnaround and

were out of sight as soon as they passed the driveway.

Reaching into his pocket, Ari took out a pack of Winstons. He was about to light up when he remembered there was no ash tray on the premises. He doubted there ever had been. There was no hint of tobacco smoke beneath the prevailing atmosphere of pine-scented disinfectant. To his thinking, the house smelled like a hospital ward.

He went outside to pull the Scion into the driveway. The police cruiser had stopped along the grassy curb at the next house. The groundskeeper was leaning on his trimmer as he spoke to the officers, who remained seated in the car. He was pointing down the street. When his eyes followed his arm he saw Ari watching him. He lowered his arm, smiled uncertainly, and nodded. Ari sensed the policemen watching him in their rearview mirrors and nodded back at the groundskeeper.

Getting into the Scion, he pulled up the driveway, stopping a few feet short of the double garage. Taking out the set of keys, he guessed which of them would work on the garage door--the odds were down to fifty-fifty, now that he had used one on the basement--and again guessed right. He heard the bolt click, and he turned the lever. As he raised the door he noted the motor in the garage ceiling. He scouted around for a remote, but could find none.

Once he was parked in the bay, he lifted the car's ash tray out of its slot and took up his suitcase from the passenger seat, placing both items on the steps leading inside. He was about to close the bay door when he heard the police cruiser driving away from the house next door.

He paused, balancing his needs against his curiosity. Curiosity won. Necessity too.

Ari began to make his way through the thick border of trees, then recalled stories of American hypersensitivity when it came to property. He backtracked and approached the house from the road. The groundskeeper had resumed trimming the grass in the shallow ditch. Seeing Ari, he stopped. A tentative moment passed before he managed a smile.

"Hello," said Ari.

"Hey," said the man, maintaining a firm grip on the handle of his garden tool.

"I've just moved into the house next door. I wanted to introduce myself to the owner here."

"That's me." The man stiffened proudly. The sweat on his face and forearms had captured bits of dirt and grass so fine it look like gunpowder residue. A man in mortal combat against his yard.

"Excuse me. I mistook you for the groundskeeper."

"That's me, too." Freeing one hand from the trimmer, he stepped across the ditch. "Howard Nottoway."

Ari took the extended hand and shook it. "Ari Ciminon."

"Most folks around here call me Howie." A half head shorter than Ari, Howie raised a courteous if wary gaze. Sprigs of white hair sprang out above each ear, imparting a cockeyed awkwardness that seemed at odds with his status as a lawn warrior.

"I didn't see any moving vans."

"My furniture will arrive later." Ari maintained a straight face, a lackadaisical assumption of bland truth. Absent the cookie-cutter smile, it was the same expression he had worn in New York, while standing near the PATH station at Liberty Plaza listening

to the names of 9/11 victims being read out by relatives of the deceased. The somber memorial was marred by scuffling between anti-war protesters and those who supported the administration. Ari had played a mental truncheon across the skulls of the troublemakers. Americans were focused on being the sole victims of the September attacks, which he found puerile and unseemly--although Ari was the first to concede the worst hurts were those closest to home. It was the sense of exclusion that annoyed him. A bit like 'God Bless America.' Where did that leave everyone else?

Anyone taking note of him that day would have seen a man who looked sublimely untroubled, even a trifle amused at the noisy fuss the police caused when they broke up the fights.

An hour later, after making an overseas phone call, he was in route to Virginia to confront this quintessential American, taming the wild in goggles and muck boots.

Howie nodded, though he looked a little confused. Ari supposed it would have made more sense if the furniture was in place before the new owner moved in.

"I was wondering..." A vaguely childish expression crossed Ari's face. "What is that?"

"Mmm?" Howie glanced down in surprise. "Just a weed whacker."

"A weed...'whacker'," Ari repeated slowly.

Howie demonstrated with a couple of short bursts of the machine. Bits of ditch grass flew up like shattered feathers. "I guess you don't see many of these in the desert."

"Sicily isn't a desert island, but it is quite dry."

"Sicily." A blurry chart from Howie's elementary school geography class rattled down in his mind. "You're Italian?"

"The Arabs conquered Sicily during the Dark Ages. That accounts for--" Ari flicked his fingers in front of his own nose, as though splashing Semitic greasepaint on his face.

"Well, yeah," Howie chuckled nervously, knocking the shield of the whacker against his ankle as though admonishing himself against indiscretions. "I wasn't trying to...you know...I wasn't.... Where'd you learn your English?"

"The missionaries taught me."

"They did a good job. I mean, there's no trace of...you know...Italian, I guess." Howie paused. "Missionaries in Italy? Isn't that sort of like taking coal to Newcastle? I mean, with the Pope there and all..."

"They were Unitarian."

"Unitarian? I didn't think they...I didn't think they were...." Howie shrugged apologetically. "Well, you learn something new every day."

"That's a good philosophy," said Ari, being careful to erase condescension with a smile.

An evangelical bolt crossed Howie's face. "Say listen, I'm with the Methodist church just down the road. You're invited to come any Sunday."

"I'll bear that in mind," Ari nodded agreeably.

"You have family coming? They're welcome to the church, too. All of you." Howie said this with a trace of reluctance, as though envisioning a truckload of Italian kids clambering over the pews.

"No family," said Ari succinctly, leaving it up to Howie to sort out the why.

"None?" Howie was sorting, and if the furrow above his goggles was any

indication, few of the options were very appetizing. "And you bought that big house just for..."

"Yes. I needed a place to stay. For my job."

"Yeah?"

"I'm an architect."

"Yeah?" Realizing the repetitive monosyllable skimmed on courtesy, he added, "That's a break from all the doctors and lawyers around here--retired and otherwise. What firm?"

"I'll be working out of my home."

Howie was alerted to the need for discretion--an alert he did not heed. "You wouldn't be involved with that new baseball field downtown, would you? The one they're shoving down our throats? I won't tell anyone. Uh...you know baseball, right?"

"I'm not an ardent fan, but I occasionally follow Montepaschi Grosseto."

"The who-da wadda?"

"I'm not familiar with that phrase. Grosseto is the best team in Italy, to my way of thinking. Of course, many of its players come from here."

What concern Ari could see gathering behind Howie's goggles relaxed on hearing this. European baseball. Who would have thought it? But it was nothing to be alarmed about. Just the same American sewage overflow as European basketball and European football.

"In any event," Ari continued, "I came over here to introduce myself. I suppose that's what I've been doing. I also wanted to ask..."

"Yeah?" said Howie, relapsing into single-word monotony.

"Those police officers you were speaking to. I noticed that they left some flowers next to my driveway."

"Yeah...they were the ones who found them."

That Ari found this answer nonsensical was written in his expression. Howie saw this and drew a face of disgust.

"Those bastards--pardon my French."

"I'm confused. Sorry."

"The real estate people." Howie propped the weed whacker against his leg, as though grounding arms. "They'll do anything to make a sale. Your agent...he didn't say anything to you about what happened here?"

"I purchased the house through a third party," Ari sighed with the guilt of gullibility. "I provided him with a list of my basic needs and he came up with this." He gestured down the road, as though pointing out a white elephant half-hidden behind the trees.

Howie clucked, revving his neck with a vigorous head-shake.

"He didn't go into any details beyond the basic floor plan, and gave me very little about the history of the place," Ari continued. "He assured me, however, that this was a quiet, safe neighborhood."

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything." Howie looked like he would be perfectly delighted to spill some broad hints, if not exactly his guts. With his free hand he pulled on one of his white tufts of hair, as though pulling the string on a doll. "I mean--"

"Please. Was there an accident? Is the house unsafe?"

"The house is fine. It's great. Just an oversized rancher, but the best one in the

neighborhood for location. There was a time most anyone around here would have snapped it up if they could have afforded it. The price dropped...afterward. But we all knew what had happened. No one would buy."

"It's very scenic."

"Yeah." Howie seemed to struggle with himself. He pulled off his protective goggles, as though to show Ari the sincerity in his eyes. "I shouldn't've blabbed."

"Those weren't the only flowers. There were others..."

"A family," Howie said. "All of them. Father, mother, two young sons."

"Died?"

"Murdered." He turned a narrow glance on Ari. "It wasn't funny."

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about what you said. About real estate agents. But of course that's terrible. How long ago?"

"Nine months."

"The killer?"

"Never caught. But they think there was more than one of them." Howie seemed reassured by Ari's abrupt gloom. "You've closed, right? There's no way you can back out?"

"You mean leave the house? I don't think that's possible."

"I have a lawyer friend who might be able to help you." It almost sounded as though he was offering Ari the loan of a loaded pistol.

"I'll bear that in mind." Ari turned towards his new house. From here, he could see only a few small patches of the white vinyl siding in the back. "They were killed in the house?"

"Yeah, and no one around here knew anything about it. Jesus, shot in broad daylight, and nobody heard."

"Really?" Ari thought about how he had been able to hear the shout of one of the police officers from inside the house.

"I would have called it in if I'd heard anything," Howie said a little defensively. "My wife, too."

"I don't doubt it," Ari said politely.

"But even if we'd heard, we would have thought they were firecrackers or something. You get a lot of kids out on the islands in the river. They fire off what we used to call Whistling Jupiters. Toy rockets. Noisy. The Mackenzies...they live on the river too, on other side of you, through the woods there. They didn't hear anything, either." A slight accusatory inflection had entered Howie's voice. As though, by taking possession of the house, Ari was retroactively guilty of not reporting the crime.

Ari nodded. "I understand perfectly."

Howie's expression relaxed. "Yeah. You said Sicily? Mafia-land, right?"

"*La stessa cosa*," Ari said with a sad smile. "'The same thing.' Cosa Nostra."

"Yeah? I guess stuff like that happens all the time over there."

"All the time."

"I'm sorry." Howie's sudden cultural delicacy was blurted, as though he had been poked by an invisible cattle prod. "I didn't mean to imply anything. I'm sure most of you folks are peaceful. Law-abiding, I mean."

"It's a beautiful island, even when Etna erupts."

"The volcano, right? That must be something to see."

"Very scenic."

"Jerry was a painter," said Howie. "An artist. No enemies. I mean, who shoots artists?"

"Who shoots little boys?" said Ari.

"Well, yeah. Right."

THREE

"Ghaith here is a certified genius!" Omar laughed, as though pointing out a duck on the Moon. "We knew that when we were kids. He could recite every sura in the Holy Koran by the age of...were you out of your swaddling yet, Ghaith?"

Ghaith snorted dismissively.

"Don't deny it," Omar joshed. "Sayyid Qutb was the same way. It's an honor from God, isn't it? What a mind! How many languages do you speak? Three? Four? And those are just the ones I knew about the last time we met."

The policeman standing next to the pickup truck sent a toothy grin through the passenger window. Ghaith did not credit him with much intelligence, although he had only first met him an hour ago. Didn't even know his name.

"We parted ways long ago," Omar sighed. "I went into construction, while Ghaith here went on to bigger and better things."

"I don't know about bigger," Ghaith laughed. "Didn't you tell me you worked on the Sweet Water? They don't get much bigger than that."

Ghaith did not add that he knew much more than that about Omar.

They were parked near a canal, but not the Sweet Water. They could hear the imposing rush of water from outlets leading back past apricot tree orchards to the river, only slightly muted by the thick ranks of reeds on the embankment. Ghaith had seen them, just before Omar doused the truck lights. They had shifted like nervous, skeletal sentries. The loudly jetting water was a seamless burden on the night.

"Sweet Water!" Omar made a sound of disgust. "I haven't been back there in

years. *The last I heard, it had two meters of silt and was mostly undrinkable. Totally gone to ruin.*"

"It'll be dredged," Ghaith tried to reassure him. "Repaired. One day. You'll see."

"Yes, but by who?" Omar's attempt to look cheerful was painfully obvious. "You've done well for yourself," he said, poking Ghaith in the shoulder, as if they were still children sharing bites from a single piece of lu'mat al-adi. "In spite of everything, you're a big success. It shows."

It almost sounded like an accusation, and Ghaith's response was a shade defensive. "Omar, I'm a clerk, that's all."

The policeman standing outside bobbed his head, laughing. Maybe he really was an idiot. Or worse.

"You're a lot busier than I am, these days," Omar shook his head. "I'm on our neighborhood advisory council."

"That's excellent," Ghaith said. "That's what we need more of."

"Try making a living out of it. I'm also digging sewage ditches."

"It has to be done. Cholera has broken out in some districts."

"Then why aren't you out there with a shovel?" Omar caught himself. "Ghaith, it's hard not to--"

"I understand." Ghaith glanced at the policeman through the window, then back at Omar. "Is that why you drove me thirty kilometers to the middle of nowhere? To tell me this?"

"I told you, I want you to meet someone."

"Your Imam."

"He can be of enormous help...to all of us."

"A Twelver?" The question was rhetorical. Ghaith knew the Imam Omar referred to was Shia.

"Hojatolesam Abdollah—" Omar leaned forward suddenly, peering through the windshield. Both he and Ghaith spotted headlights up the road at the same moment.

"Is this him?" Ghaith asked.

Omar gripped the steering wheel, as though bracing himself. After a moment, he said, "Naqib is on his way out. They're bringing in Jabar."

Ghaith stared at him. "Since when were you so familiar with the inner workings of the Ministry?"

"There will be changes. Changes bigger than you can imagine."

"I can imagine," Ghaith said slowly.

"You understand, don't you?" said Omar, his voice trailing into a flimsy rag of sound. In this heat, the sweat patches merging from his armpits to his chest was understandable. But the steering wheel had become slick from his hands. Noting his own weak voice, he repeated, more sternly, "You understand?"

"Under the circumstances, in such friendly surroundings, yes," Ghaith answered, reaching into his shirt pocket for his cigarettes. "I'm going to die."

Omar raised his head. "No fear. You haven't changed."

Ghaith did not speak.

"I've changed my name," Omar said, clearing his throat. "It's no longer Omar. It's Abid Ali."

Ghaith got a good laugh out of that. His old playmate was telling him he was no longer Sunni. Abid Ali-Omar stared at him.

"You're the only man I've ever met who has no faith. No god. No tribe. Truly none."

"I believe in God, Omar," Ghaith said, blowing smoke. "I just don't have a high opinion of Him."

It happened in the 3rd Precinct, Sector 312:

Jerry Riggins. Thirty-two. Artist. Found slumped in an easy chair in the first floor living room. A single gunshot to the side of the head. Thirty-eight caliber.

Moria Riggins. Thirty-one. Entrepreneur. Part-owner of Moria's Notions. Found upstairs in bed, in the master bedroom. A single gunshot to the side of the head. Thirty-eight caliber.

Joshua Riggins. Seven. Found in bed, in his bedroom down the hall from the master bedroom. Single gunshot.

William Riggins. Five. Found in bed, in his bedroom one door down from Joshua's. Single gunshot.

This was the bare outline of the story that Ari discovered in the local newspaper's internet archives. Munching on a bag of Fritos, he tried to delve further into the crime-- via cyberspace.

There wasn't much. The police had been alerted by an anonymous phone tip. When they arrived they found that the back door had been forced. "Really smashed in," as one of the officers put it. The accompanying picture attested to this, with broken glass

piled on the sill of a door half off its hinges and large splinters from the jam leaning across the opening. It was assumed that (Howie's protest notwithstanding) a neighbor had heard the racket and called from an untraceable number. ("Really?" Ari mused.) The motive appeared to be robbery. Although a complete inventory was unavailable, the insurance company reported the absence of some rings and necklaces. The killers must have possessed some rare common sense: trace evidence was nonexistent. There were no unaccountable fingerprints or footprints on the premises. There were no ridges of evidence on which the DNA profilers could toss their genetic grappling hooks: no saliva, no mucous, no skin under the victims' nails, no semen, no wayward strands of hair. Speculation was that there was more than one culprit, but there was no real reason why the reporters would suggest this. The bullets had all come from the same gun.

The article made no mention of any signs of resistance. Nor did it divulge any forensic details about the wound ballistics. A 150-grain round nose bullet penetrated, a controlled expansion 110-grain hollowpoint left a wider track and was more prone to deform the target. Had the police encountered neat holes or bloody messes? Ari thought the question important. The type of ammunition used sometimes revealed the killer's expertise and premeditation.

He knew something about these things.

The murders had taken place near midnight, on December 23. Jerry Riggins' last sight had been of the Christmas tree in the corner of his living room.

Nearly all of other online articles dealt with the communal sense of loss and sorrow. The Riggins family had been well-beloved. A host of friends and acquaintances left testaments on their websites (one that displayed some of Jerry's art and announced

upcoming shows, another for Moria's Notions) and on a blog provided by the newspaper. Ari scanned through them. Most seemed heartfelt.

"We will miss you at church, Moria. Your dedication to the Lord and your public service will be missed. Your children were so dear, so wonderful. And while we didn't see much of Jerry, he too will be missed."

So Jerry wasn't much of a churchgoer. Ari could sympathize with that.

"What can I say? I will miss you. All the old Rebels of '92 will miss you. Remember the pyramid? My ankle still hurts when it rains! Oh please, Moria, come back. Come back. KS."

Alongside the sadness lay fear. This neighborhood was sequestered from the hot crime spots of the city, the Riggins house even more so--tucked far away from the main road in a snug cul-de-sac, with the wide and innocent James protecting the front door. For something like this to happen in a place like this brought home the rawbone uncertainty of life. Nobody was safe, and with the killer or killers still at large, unpleasant possibilities lurked in every dark corner. While common consensus was that the perpetrators must be far away by now, there loomed the risk that they were known to their victims. That they could even be neighbors.

It was not a good time for a stranger to be taking up residence, Ari thought, especially when that stranger was replacing a family so popular, and so gruesomely displaced. Especially when that stranger was undeniably foreign, bearing a striking resemblance to the late Gamal Abdel Nasser, dark complexion, pencil moustache and all.

More to the point was the time of murder. The coroner placed it in the wee hours, a little before or after midnight. But Howie had told Ari it had happened in broad

daylight.

Of course, it could have been an exaggeration. Ari's English was excellent, but he occasionally misinterpreted figures of speech. Perhaps 'broad daylight' could be interpreted as 'in a safe and friendly neighborhood like this.'

The keyboard became greasy from Ari's Fritos. The snack had been inside one of the five shopping bags on the kitchen counter. Most everything else looked inedible to him. Even the milk in the refrigerator seemed bland.

He plugged his charger into the same electrical strip used by the computer and slid his cell phone into the cradle.

After a night spent on the bare wood floor, Ari set out next morning in search of real food. Fortunately, he found an Indo-Pak grocery on Hull Street that was heavy on the cuisine of Northern India which he often favored. Unfortunately, the store did not take credit cards. A small container of paneer cubes, some roti wrapped in cellophane, a box of chick peas, a variety of chaats, and an overabundance of sticky-sweet gulab jamun all but wiped out his ready cash.

He next stopped at a Food Lion and hunted for anything that could be concocted into French cuisine, for which he had also acquired a taste. But while all the necessary ingredients were present, he really had no idea how to prepare a proper *coq au vin*. He resigned himself to buying a roaster chicken, some tea bags and a few more bags of Fritos, which tasted similar to the roasted corn he had wolfed down as a child, then as a teen, then as an adult.

He stopped at a Goodwill and used his credit card to buy a thin mattress, a thick

blanket and a pillow.

He drove around his new neighborhood a little bit, investigating the streets, thinking about his new job, brooding on what Howie had told him about the Riggins family. There was a harsh separateness about these suburban houses that made the discreet death of an entire family all too plausible. Sought-for privacy incurred an unsought isolation. While most of the homes peppering the south shore were not screened off by thick skirts of trees and hedgerows, like those of Beach Court, the sense of inviolable territory was unmistakable—as was emphasized by the Neighborhood Watch signs that festooned nearly every block and conceivable entrance. Ari cooked up an inferred greeting for each door he passed: "Hello! How are you doing? Why are you here? What do you want? Welcome! Go away!"

He sat before the computer, staring at a floor plan of this very house, posted by the newspaper several days after the killings. Employing miniature body outlines similar to those used at crime scenes, it pinpointed the location of the bodies as they had been found by the police. Ari clicked on the image to enlarge it, then printed it out. Hefting the Fritos in the crook of his arm, he took up the two pages (main and upper floors--the basement wasn't included) and embarked on a more informed tour of his house.

The lead article did not speculate as to whom had been shot first, but logic would suggest that would be the chief protector of the household. Ari was culturally inclined to assume that would be the male. He went downstairs into the living room. After studying the printout, he stood next to a phantom easy chair, facing the ghost of a Christmas tree. He folded the printout, stuck it into his pocket, and munched on some corn chips. Each

bite sent an inordinately loud echo through the room. Of course, there was no furniture or carpeting to absorb the sound--but it still didn't fit. The stairs leading up to the second floor were scarcely ten feet away. He shook his head at the ghost in the phantom chair.

"You didn't do your job," he admonished--although only a portion of his disgust was directed at Jerry Riggins. His original assumption was discarded within the same few minutes it had been formulated.

"Not even with a silencer," he murmured. In a confined space like this it would have made a loud and distinctive 'pop'.

He went upstairs to the master bedroom. Judging from the diagram, Mrs. Riggins had been sitting up in bed when she died, her legs over the side. The headboard was against the outside wall; the side of the bed was about a three feet from a window. Ari stared out at the river. Whistling Jupiters? Could Moria have mistaken the gunshot downstairs for a firecracker? It didn't seem feasible. The small, tree-dotted island was halfway to the north shore. On the other hand, coming out of a deep sleep, the shot could have seemed like part of a dream.

"Were you dreaming, Moria?" he asked, looking at the phantom bed. "Or were you deaf?" He stared hard at the invisible woman, then added, "Did you take a sleeping pill before going to bed?"

He stopped before each boy's room--rooms he had freely roamed the day before, but which had become (now that he had seen the diagram) tainted by history. This was the belly of the crime, and his stomach knotted painfully. He would study the rooms more closely, later. He had plenty of time.

Downstairs, he went into the kitchen and poked a wooden spoon through his

soaking chick peas. Then he went to the back door, set off in a small alcove adjacent to the kitchen, across from the basement door. He stood outside on the small stoup. To the right the yard sloped down to the patio. To the left some boxwoods hid a central air unit and blocked the road from view. Howie's house was barely visible through the trees. Turning, he leaned in to study the frame. The wood was crisp, unmarked, obviously new. He closed the door and tapped it with his knuckles. Very solid. Of course, it too was new, but Ari thought the real estate people would have replaced the damaged door with one similar or identical to the old one. Again, the problem of noise. Breaking through here would have created a tremendous racket.

He tried to re-enter and found he had locked himself out. None of keys on his ring worked. He drew back a little, frowning at the door knob.

Probably a minor slip-up on the real estate agent's part. He had had the old keys hanging from his office pegboard, perhaps, and had simply forgotten to slip the new one onto the ring after the door was installed. Or....

Ari smiled. He went down to the patio and let himself in through the basement door.

Once again at the computer, he returned to the newspaper archives and pulled up a picture of the Riggins family hiking in the mountains. Hunched under backpacks, they were beaming at the camera as though the weight on their backs and the high trail they had just ascended (a section of the Appalachian Trail, the caption advised readers) were of no consequence to their good spirits. Jerry appeared to be of average height, slender but fit, glowing with health and optimism. Standing by his side was Moria, her grin so broad it practically cracked her cheekbones. Her short bangs were plastered by sweat to

her forehead. Beneath them her eyes glowed brilliantly, almost ecstatically, as though she was a novice who had discovered the temple of Nature. Her olive T-shirt was pinched by the backpack straps and sagged at the front, exposing the sharp line of her collarbone. The boys, looking a little blown from their hike up the hill, stood at the forefront--displayed like trophies, each one held by the shoulders as though being thrust toward the lens. They had matching, child-sized backpacks. The eldest looked highly pleased, the youngest looked relieved--perhaps he had just been told that the hike was over and that they were now going home.

A little more browsing brought Ari to a photograph of a small ceremony. Mr. and Mrs. Riggins were receiving a plaque in recognition of their services and donations to a charity for the families of police officers who had fallen in the line of duty (their deaths referred to in the article as 'End of Watch'). Behind them stood two flags. The American flag was known throughout the world, but the blue one next to it was more problematic, and in these non-innocent times a touch risqué. Its seal bore the image of a woman in Roman costume, one breast bared. She was standing on a man's neck, giving the defeated tyrant a perfect view up the Amazonian culottes. Ari concluded the flag must belong to the province...or was it state?...of Virginia.

The man presenting the award was nearly a head taller than Jerry Riggins--a full head taller than Moria. Huge. On the beefy side. Even before Ari read the caption, he knew it was a cop.

Detective Louis B. Carrington.

Moria was in the center, while Jerry seemed to be trying to edge himself out of the shot even as Carrington extended his hand. He was smiling, yet Jerry's wariness was

painfully obvious. Very much out of place in a man being hailed for his civic virtue. Ari had seen that same kind of reluctant handshake many times before.

Jerry's wife, meanwhile, wore the familiar glow of the mountains, as though she had just clambered up a high peak--which, socially speaking, she had, at least according to the article. Ari focused on her shining eyes and gave a small shake of his head. He switched back to the detective, who had no trace of the world-weariness common to his breed. Perfectly comfortable, if a little too casual, with his stomach pooching beyond the perimeter of his single breasted blazer, his loose white shirt draping over the top of his belt.

With a grunt, Ari threw down his emptied bag of Fritos. It was natural to be curious about the fate of the Riggins family. He had done nothing different from what any new owner of a house whose previous occupants had been murdered would have done. But it was none of his business. He needed to allow his curiosity to subside.

If only there was something to do....

He checked his email. The inbox was empty. Not even spam in the junk file.

At least he could look at the news, although he noticed some of his favorite websites had been filtered out.

He sat back. The odor of slowly roasting chicken rose upstairs. He glanced at his watch and decided to give it another thirty minutes. Besides, he was filled up with corn chips.

His hands hovered over the mouse and keyboard. Idly, he moved the cursor up. The address for Jerry Riggins' website, which he had already visited once, dropped down from his browser. He clicked, and was soon looking at some of Jerry's paintings. Ari

had never had much time for art. He had acquired a few pieces over the years, fully recognizing that he based his choices on decorative aptness rather than intrinsic merit. Jerry belonged to what Ari thought of as the 'smudge school'. No doubt there were connoisseurs who could explain the rationale behind them, but to Ari art that had to be explained, that was not-self evident, was no art at all. To spend years of higher learning to delve the profound meaning of a smudge was a waste of precious time and intellect. But perhaps he was being unfair. Were the paintings more vibrant when seen in person? More...comprehensible? Ari scrolled down to the list of Jerry's exhibits.

Several years' worth of art shows were listed, including a month-long show in December of the previous year at a university gallery. No doubt visitors had flocked to see the paintings while the autopsies were being performed.

Near the bottom Ari came across an exhibit that had begun a week ago, at Foxlight Gallery in an area of the city known as Shockhoe Bottom. Hadn't Howie said something about a sports center due to be built there? There was a small note under the announcement indicating that it had been posted August 9.

This was not the blogging section, where site visitors could add to the numerous fond memorials about the family. This was embedded on the main page. Someone had access to Jerry's website. Going to the menu, Ari clicked on About This Site and discovered that the webmaster was someone named Tina. She could be contacted at Tina.Press@moriasnotions.com.

He glanced at his watch and went downstairs to remove his chicken from the oven. It didn't look like a success. Besides, stuffed with Fritos, his stomach rebelled at the idea of adding more, no matter how savory or otherwise. He placed the roasting pan

in the refrigerator and went back up to the computer.

After a long pause, he typed 'Iceland' into the browser. He chose a tourist website and perused the sights. Iceland was a land of geysers, hot springs, waterfalls, glaciers, fjords. Very scenic.

He leaned back in his chair, his mind filling with sulfurous clouds and hallucinatory fumes. Out of the mist a face appeared. A lovely face, full of wisdom and understanding.

And then, as if twisted and torn by the acid in the air, the face mutated into a horrible mask of despair and hatred.

Ari sat up, closed down the computer, and looked at his watch.

FOUR

The Kia Bongo mini-truck stopped at the edge of the canal, about twenty yards from the white Toyota pickup. Omar grunted with exasperation when the driver turned off his lights.

"How are we supposed to see what we're doing?" he complained to the policeman standing outside the passenger window, speaking past Ghaith as though he was not there. Did it salve the conscience to treat the man you were going to kill as though he were already gone?

The policeman gave a noncommittal grunt. He was cradling an assault rifle.

Ghaith finished his DJ and dropped the glowing butt out the window. The man outside, after resisting the impulse for a moment, crushed it out with his heel.

Omar stepped out of the Toyota and shouted at the newcomers. The driver of the mini truck switched his headlights back on, jumped out, and waved his arms in angry frustration. Omar returned the gesture as he walked over. Ghaith noted the dust kicked up by Omar's feet. It seemed at odds with the pounding of water from the canal outlets. With an artist's eye he studied the skeletal reeds beyond Omar, then the crude painting of an apricot on the cab door of the mini truck. Then he returned his gaze to the three hooded men and two guards seated in the bed of the truck. No doubt Ghaith and the prisoners were all slated to die together.

He considered lighting up another cigarette, felt a slight rasp in his throat, and abandoned the idea. He had been smoking too much lately, and these cheap DJ's were deadly. Up to a point, smoking steadied his nerves, but over the last week he had

concluded he was overdoing it. He had promised himself to cut back to two packs a day, maybe even to one. Give himself a little more wind.

Omar went to the back of the truck and spoke to the guards, who stood and forced the prisoners to their feet.

"What's your name?" Ghaith asked the policeman holding the gun on him.

"Why?"

"I was thinking it would be more polite to use your name than just calling you 'Idiot'."

"Do you want me to shoot you now?"

"Not really, Idiot. I was wondering if you knew what this was all about."

"Of course I know."

"Really? Say, Idiot, could you let me in on it? Like Omar said, I'm a godless man. The meaning of life has totally eluded me."

"What are you talking about?" Idiot twitched.

"Oh...sorry. You really think this has something to do with the power shift in the Ministry? The Shia are replacing the Sunnis. Do you think that interests God?"

"Don't talk about such things."

"I'm sorry. I have a tendency to rudeness. Omar...a good Sunni, by the way...can tell you. I didn't even thank him when he let me fuck him up the ass."

"I'll shoot you..."

"I'm sure you'll get around to it. Anyway, we were young. We hardly had hair on our balls. But we parted ways before I ever got the chance to return the favor. He's been dying for my ass ever since."

"Abid Ali!" the policeman shouted.

At first, Ari thought the webmaster was mistaken. It seemed that Richmond, after dark, was practically abandoned. All the shops along Broad Street were closed, or boarded up, and life was limited to clumps of young men and women standing at street corners, their collective mood variable, sometimes staring glumly, sometimes laughing, occasionally yelling at other clumps of young men and women. He turned back to Main Street, only to encounter a rank of office towers that seemed in their way equally stark, with the added deficit of blank sterility. But as he progressed down Main he began to see more pedestrians, and at the bottom of a hill--Shockhoe Bottom, in fact--lights, noise and music announced the presence of a reasonably vibrant nightlife.

He parked under a raised railway. Seeing shadowy figures flit under the skeletal trestle, he wondered if he would be lucky enough to find the xB gone when he got back. Crossing the cobblestone pavement, he made his way past bars and tattoo parlors. It seemed comfortably godless. Women in formal but extremely revealing dresses walked unaccompanied up the block. Ari assumed they were headed for the restaurants and clubs burrowed in a row of old tobacco warehouses. He found the women exotic, if not particularly sophisticated. Very scenic and, judging by the length of the slits in their skirts (another Mediterranean assumption), very available. He was interested, but unavailable.

There seemed little evidence of artistic inclination among these revelers. It was hard to imagine a gallery thriving in this environment, especially at this hour. But according to Tina the Webmaster, Foxlight closed at ten.

At the next intersection he turned right and came upon a cluster of old shops converted to new sins. But it was limited in scale, suitable to a small city, without the pervasive air of decadence of a major metropolitan red light district gone to seed. Was this part of the area slated to be condemned to make way for a baseball park? Then sin here was very weak indeed.

There...between some kind of parlor and some kind of shop that sold smoking paraphernalia...Foxlight. Unfamiliar with local fashions, Ari did not know if the wooden sign out front signaled a rebellious reticence or a trendy departure from the gaudy neon to either side. Through an unadorned window with a wide chrome border that reflected his tie a dozen or so people were milling between two powder-blue walls. Ari went inside.

The sounds from neighboring bars and of cars revving across the cobblestones were swept away by silence, leaving only a trace of bass vibration. A few patrons glanced his way, their attention drawn by the short burst of noise from the street. Then they double-taked on Ari, his blue suit emphasizing his athletic build, his dark gaze taking in the scene like some mystical X-ray machine. He was aware of how unsettling his glance could be and consciously worked at softening it with amusement. He couldn't change his eyes--but he could smile.

Reassured by his amicable demeanor, the people who had turned his way turned back to the exhibit. Ari let his smile subside into benevolent curiosity. He didn't, after all, want to look like a yokel. He walked tentatively into the center of the small gallery, thinking an aggressive stride might be interpreted as a desire to attack modern art and its advocates. Even critics needed to approach gingerly, a delicate step being equated with sensitive objectivity.

Each painting was hung from the ceiling by a pair of wires that converged behind the canvas. Sidling up to the first canvas, an orange, squarish smudge planted in a field of smaller purple smudges, he allowed his cursory inspection to drift down to a small plaque.

Elevation #6 circa 2003

Jerry Riggins - Richmond, Virginia

1973 - 2005

Ari's chin was lifted on a cloud of perfume. A tall brunette in a low-cut, skin-hugging tube top had come up next to him. His eyes involuntarily drifted away from the orange smudge to the aromatic cavern of the woman's breasts. She must have detoured to the gallery while on her way to one of Shockoe's bars. She began to speak, but was interrupted by a man in a business suit who urged her to come on, they were wasting their time here. The woman's glossy lips twisted in a moue of disappointment as she followed him out.

Most of the others present seemed to be serious connoisseurs of Jerry Riggins' blurry visions. Although twelve was not many, in a place like this it constituted a crowd. It ranged from a silver-haired couple to a pair of young men, apparently also a couple, in skimpy T-shirts and threadbare jeans. Ari found himself drawn into a small orbit of murmurs, the observers treating the gallery like a library, or a morgue. Had anyone been sitting at the black imitation-marble desk in the back, Ari would have expected a hush of admonition directed against the one or two voices raised above a whisper.

"The optimism just fades. You can see it."

"They get darker at the end."

"As if he knew..."

The gallery door opened, letting in some buddy-buddy shouts from the street and a petite blonde in gray slacks and a non-matching khaki jacket. Ari wondered if this was typical business apparel of Western females. She wore a flustered, busy air--until her eyes fell on Ari. She turned away quickly to one of the darker blotches on the far wall. Ari resumed his inspection of the orange smudge, determined to delve its meaning.

"What people call 'art' these days."

Ari turned to the speaker. The new arrival. He had thought she wanted to avoid him, for whatever reason, and was surprised she had so quickly changed her mind and crossed the room.

"Oh, I don't know," Ari said sagely, turning back to the smudge. "Notice, for example, the intensity of the encrustation and the fine brush strokes on the border."

The woman shot him a hooded glance. "You're joking, right?"

"Do you think these paintings are worth a lot of money?"

The silver-haired man overheard and spewed venom from his raised nose. Ari supposed that, outside of an auction house, money and art did not belong in the same sentence.

The blonde, on the other hand, did not seem to think the question gauche. "They are now," she answered. "You know what happened?"

"To the artist and his family? Yes. A terrible crime."

She seemed vaguely amused by his response, as though he had missed a joke.

She knows me.

Ari found her unstudied pertness attractive, but the gum she was gnawing at was unsightly in the extreme.

"You know what they say. The value always shoots up when the artist...demises."

"Ah. They *were* shot, weren't they?"

"I didn't mean a pun--"

"Of course not."

How can she possibly know me?

The gallery door opened. Ari heard a harsh snap of words from someone on the sidewalk.

"Bill, you've drunk too much. You're falling--"

The door shut. Ari did not bother glancing toward the window to see if Bill had gone down face-first. He was focused on the woman with the girlish face, now turned up at him in unwarranted sarcasm. He wanted to prolong the conversation, to gnaw at her identity with the same intensity that she worked her gum.

Someone loomed up next to him--a large presence, impossible to ignore. He stopped a foot away from Ari and swiveled to the wall, facing the orange smudge.

"So...Miss..." Ari perched himself on the edge of the sentence and waited for the petite blonde to respond. She stared him, then at the large man next to him, then again at Ari, as though trying to decide if one or both belonged in a zoo. He made a modest sliding gesture to guide or accompany her to the next painting. But this bit of universal body language went untranslated. The new arrival had obviously put her out. That was Ari's conclusion, at least. It could not have anything to do with himself, or else she

would not have approached him the way she had.

"Okay, it's orange." The newcomer spread his jacket away from his stomach and hooked his thumbs in his trousers, giving Ari a sidelong leer after delivering his assessment.

"You don't need to be a detective to see that," Ari smiled.

The man lifted his hands in mock horror. "Busted!"

"Not at all. I saw your picture in the news journal."

"Journal? You make me sound like Man of the Year."

Detective Lewis B. Carrington had been careless with his razor that morning. A fresh scab, surrounded by small white flecks from a styptic pencil, nestled just under his jaw. Ari sensed his baseline was bull-headed aggressiveness, that he was quick on the attack, even when going after his own face.

"So tell me, do you like this stuff, Mr. Cinnamon?" Carrington jutted his scarred chin towards the orange smudge.

"As I was telling this young lady..."

But the petite blonde was no longer at his side. Ari scanned the room. There was a burst of noise and he turned in time to see her scooting out the door.

"Your girlfriend take off?" Carrington flinched unconvincingly. "Didn't mean to chase her away."

"Do you know her?"

"You mean you don't? You were just starting to put the move on her?"

Carrington shrugged. "Double whammy on me!"

He was intentionally putting Ari on guard, inferring that he was being observed,

studied...followed. For what reason, Ari could only guess. He smiled. "It's Mr. Ciminon, Detective."

"I stand miscorrected." Carrington again nodded at the painting before them. "So you didn't say...you like this stuff?"

"I haven't formed an opinion, yet."

"That's good," said the detective. "Keeping an open mind and all. I'm no good that way. My mind clammed shut from twenty feet off. I thought, 'they fire the janitor or something? When are they going to clean up around here? When does the show start?'"

"That's what you thought."

"Like a clam. I told Jerry the same thing. Told him most of his stuff was like ham on rye that's been sitting around for a couple years. Whoa, I'm sorry. You people don't go in for ham, right?"

"You knew Jerry?"

"Sure I knew him. Him and his wife were good people. I get the guys who killed them, they'll end up looking a lot worse than this." Carrington winked at the smudge.

"But this is America. People can do pretty much what they like. And do."

"You're speaking about the paintings."

"Oh...yeah." Carrington grinned. At least his teeth looked lean. "Told ol' Jer right up, this isn't anything but shit on a shingle. Give him credit, though--at least he didn't make pictures of crosses soaking in piss."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Say, Cinnamon, now that we've been properly introduced, why don't we go out for a drink. Whoa! There I go again! You people don't go in for alcohol, do you?"

"A cup of tea would suit me," Ari said.

"Tea?"

"But first, please excuse me for a moment."

"Well, sure, but--"

Ari made a rapid tour of the gallery. There were no other artists on display to distract him. The show was devoted entirely to Jerry Riggins. And since the deceased had limited himself (or been limited by his talent) to smudges of various shades and hues, the exhibit did not hold his attention for long. He concentrated mainly on the small plaques and the dates of composition, with brief glances at the paintings. By the time he rejoined Carrington he had fallen into a speculative mood.

"They were right," he said to the detective as they emerged onto the street.

"Who about what?"

"Two women I overheard. They said Mr. Riggins' paintings had grown darker towards the end of his life." Ari ran his eyes over the street, but there was no sign of the petite blonde. "And indeed, starting two years ago, his style grew increasingly darker."

"Maybe he changed his brand of paint." Carrington was smirking, as though the subject was inane.

"That's possible. It's also possible that he was becoming depressed."

"You forget, I knew him. He had the perfect life. It was just the ending that screwed him." The detective released a long, philosophical breath. "But I guess the same applies to all of us."

"Yes, indeed. Where is it you want us to go? I'm parked under those railway tracks. I can follow you."

FIVE

Omar was preoccupied, overseeing the removal of the prisoners. Their hands were bound. Two of them had lost their balance and fallen in the truck bed. The Bongo driver took an automatic rifle from off the passenger seat and trained it upwards while the guards lifted the prisoners by their wrists.

"AK-74," Ghaith nodded sagely. "A good journeyman weapon, although I prefer the old forty-sevens."

"You won't be so lucky." Idiot's sneer came all too naturally.

"Of course he won't shoot me," Ghaith said conversationally. "I told you, Idiot, he plans to ram me up the ass. But you see...Omar and me...well, you heard. We have a history together. For an old friend, I would want to do what's right. You see, when I stuck it to him, he was quite dry. I won't lie to you. I didn't get much pleasure out of the experience. It was like fucking sandpaper. So I was wondering...when I'm bent over, and my good friend has his cock all stiff and ready...do you think I should advise him to lick my asshole first? You know, give it a good slathering? That way, he'll have a nice, smooth ride. I'd be doing him a favor, believe me. I walked with a limp for a whole week after I banged that dustbin of his. My dick looked like a roasted pepper, and you imagine how it felt. I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to him. But you see the problem, don't you?"

"Abid Ali!" Idiot shouted frantically.

"What!" There was trace of hysteria in Omar's response. He assumed was going to live to see the dawn, but that scarcely made this night any easier.

"This blasphemer! What he's saying!"

Omar gave the cab of the pickup a cursory scowl. "Let him blaspheme," he barked before focusing again on the three prisoners.

Idiot puzzled over this a moment, then nodded. "Yes. You keep talking like this. You're going to Hell."

"Why Idiot, you're beginning to sound like a yid. A little less intelligent, maybe--"

"You shut up!"

Ghaith raised a hand at the windshield, pointing at Omar. "You see what good friends we are? 'Let him blaspheme.' You don't meet many like him. That's why I need to warn him. But how can I tell him to give me a good, slathering rim job right at that...you know, that delicate moment? It's not very romantic. And if even a blockhead like me can see that, what about Omar? Ah, I can see it now! Poor Omar! Going limp just when--"

"God be praised!"

Omar was waving towards the police truck. Idiot opened the passenger door.

"Come!"

The Scion was still where Ari had left it. He sighed, leaned against the door, and waited until Carrington pulled up in a dark Lexus that seemed completely out of tune with the man's personality and pay check. The little white car drew another smirk from the detective. Ari stiffened when Carrington waved for him to follow, palm up. Getting behind his wheel, he forced the image of the rude gesture out of his mind. Westerners were naturally tactless.

They drove about ten blocks to a small all-night diner on Third Street. Inside, they found an empty booth near the front. A waitress in jeans and a white blouse brought them menus and asked them what they wanted to drink. Ari ordered tea. After a prolonged inward struggle, Carrington took a Coke. He watched with approval as the waitress walked to the back of the diner.

"They don't have uniforms in a lot of these places, anymore," the detective observed. "Good thing, too. Nothing puts you off your oats more than varicose veins packed like sausage in support hose."

Ari perused the menu.

"See anything you like?" He glanced across at Ari's menu, as if he didn't have an identical one already in his hands. "Must have something veggie in there for you."

"You seem to assume that I'm a Muslim. Also, that Muslims don't eat meat."

"You aren't? They don't?"

"Beef is perfectly acceptable, and it's well represented in this *carte*."

Carrington raised his brow. "That's something. Your English is better than mine. Those missionaries really know how to cram it down your throat."

Alerted, Ari barely paused as he turned a laminated page of his menu. "In fact, I ate before going to the gallery. I'm not at all hungry. The tea will be fine."

"I hate to eat in front of someone who's just sitting." Carrington seemed genuinely put out by the prospect.

The waitress came back with their drinks. While Carrington tore the wrapping off his straw, Ari stared at the cold glass in front him.

"What is this?"

"Why tea, sugar." Then the waitress smacked her head with her order pad.

"Why, I forgot to ask if you wanted sweetened or unsweetened."

"Do you perhaps have hot tea?"

"What? You mean like in a cup?"

"Exactly."

"Aw, don't be so fussy," Carrington grouched. "Drink up. You know what they say. When in Rome..." The detective barked a laugh. "Hey, you're *from* Rome!"

"Sicily is far from Rome," Ari informed him.

"Same country. Hey, I go to Texas, I expect iced tea there, too."

Completely oblivious to the fact that he had just reversed his own logic--or not caring--Carrington gave the waitress his order. Something called a bacon cheeseburger.

"And none of your 'medium rare'. I want my burger black all the way through. Use a flamethrower if you have to."

Officiously noting all of this on her pad, the waitress asked, "And for your sides, sir?"

"Fries."

"You get two."

"Then more fries."

She ticked this off and, with more than a trace of reluctance, turned to Ari. "And you, sir?"

"Nothing," he answered, closing his menu and handing it to her. "But I would greatly appreciate it if you would bring me some hot tea. And..." He gestured at the iced tea, palm down. "You may take this away."

As she reached for the glass, Carrington touched her wrist. "Say Mabel, is Antonio working tonight?"

"Sure, he's back there."

"Can you get him to come out here?"

She gave the detective a puzzled look, then shrugged. "Sure."

She left, the ice in the tea rattling with swishy petulance.

"You passed up free refills with that, my friend," Carrington shook his head, despairing of Ari's poor sense of economics. "By the way, don't mind Mabel. She's a local gal. Never been much for PC."

"PC?"

"Multigarbagalism."

Ari did not inquire further, allowing himself to slide into a polite reticence. The way Carrington had charged into the art gallery and blundered into Ari's conversation with the petite blonde smacked of a perilous impatience. He looked to be in his early forties. Old enough to have learned the benefits of subtlety. Thwarted in any way, for any reason, he would back off to study his intended target, waiting for his next chance. That was how Ari sized him up, in any event. Men like Carrington always showed their hand too soon, piling up their self-created difficulties, but usually persevering. One look at him, and people would be inclined to get on his good side as soon as possible, if they couldn't avoid him altogether. Ari noted the gold wedding band and experienced a moment of sympathy for the Mrs.

A young man with dark curly hair came out bearing a plate, which he sat before Carrington. "You wanted to see me?"

"Hey, Antonio! I got one of your fellow countrymen here."

Ari and Antonio exchanged glances while Carrington inspected his hamburger. Finding it charred to his satisfaction, he began squirting it with ketchup.

"What, no *ciaos*?" Carrington said after a moment, looking up. "We don't get many Eye Ties around here. Thought you two would appreciate meeting." He slid a fry into his mouth, but quickly spit it back out. "Yeeow! Kinda hot there, Antonio."

"Our customers like them hot," Antonio explained evenly.

"Well I'm a customer, and I don't like sticking glowing hot pokers in my mouth."

"I'll tell the chef."

"Oh--no! Don't bother. I'll just sit back and watch you guys intercourse with each other. Give them a few minutes to cool down." Carrington leaned forward and smiled at Ari. "Antonio here's one of those foreign exchange students."

Antonio gave a small cough. "Not exactly. I'm a research fellow."

Carrington frowned, as though the description sounded bizarre to his prominent ears. "I was trying to be polite. Anyway, Antonio picks up extra change washing dishes here at night. A real go-getter, eh Antonio? Or what is it your real name is?"

"Giosuè," Antonio sighed, holding out his hand. As Ari took it, the two shared their opinion of the detective with brief smirks.

There was another awkward pause.

"Well?" Carrington demanded. "Don't you people want to talk about the old homestead or something?"

Giosuè threw a shrug. "*Sono da Milano.*"

Ari returned the shrug. "*Siracusa.*"

"Ah."

They fell silent.

"That's it?" said Carrington gruffly.

"We're from different parts of the country," Giosuè said. "Very far apart. We don't know each others' area."

"You got nothing in common?" Carrington tossed down his paper napkin. "We had a whole damn civil war here just so we'd all have something in common."

"We had a guy named Garibaldi..." A slow grin drew itself across Giosuè's face and he again turned to Ari. "*Ho sentito Berlusconi ha alcuni amici il vostro modo.*"

Ari chuckled and shook his head in protest. "*Vuoi dire Cirillo? E 'qui negli Stati Uniti, con il resto dei delinquenti.*"

"*Sì! Sì!*" Giosuè laughed.

"*Senza il Primo Ministro ha una villa il tuo modo?*"

"*San Martino, Arcore. Nizza proprietà.*" Giosuè shook his head and popped a *whew* from between compressed lips. "*Non tutti hanno uno che si è fatto uomo per un giardiniere.*"

"*Sono tutti ladri,*" Ari sighed. "*Vedi Berlusconi e Bush.*"

"*Nel letto insieme.*"

"*Domanda è, chi è in cima?*"

"All right!" Carrington interrupted their laughter. "So everything's hunky-dory in Italy and the Pope's still a virgin."

Giosuè took his cue, nodded at Ari, and retreated into the kitchen.

Carrington no longer seemed enamored with his bacon cheeseburger. He glanced

at his watch, grimaced, tapped his thumbs on his plate. It seemed obvious that a pet theory had just gone down in flames. But what? Why would it matter if Ari was Italian or not? Unless he was trying to verify if he was in the country legally. Yes...an illegal alien could be...evicted. And perhaps Carrington had not believed he was Italian.

In any event, it looked as though Carrington didn't like the idea of *anyone* living in the Riggins house. Did he think to do so was a kind of sacrilege?

"Hope this'll do you," said the waitress as she brought Ari a white porcelain cup filled with hot water. On the side of the saucer lay an unopened tea bag.

"I suppose..." Ari picked up the bag and looked at it uncertainly.

"They don't have tea bags in Sicily?" Carrington asked, watching him.

"Of course." Ari noted the tab on the pack and pulled. It came out of the envelope, along with a sachet of tea, attached by a string to the tab between his fingers. He placed the small sack in the cup and draped the string over the side, then smiled up at the waitress. "Excellent."

She lifted her chin, lowered her chin, and walked away.

Suddenly hungry again, Carrington wolfed a bite out of his hamburger. He winked at Ari. "Don't know what you're missing," he said, the words muffled as he chewed.

"You had something to talk to me about?" Ari said, inspecting the steeping tea.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"That means you want to talk to me about what you want to talk about."

"Guess it does," Carrington snorted, thinking over his words. "I wanted to talk about...like how the value of a painting goes up when the artist dies, while the value of

his house goes down. You did buy that house down on Beach Court, didn't you?"

"Do the police here keep track of property transfers?"

"Not much. But some." Carrington stuffed several fries in his mouth. They were no longer too hot for him, Ari supposed. "You can see the difference, though. The guy who invented the car, you don't get spooked every time you drive just because he's dead. Same with the paintings. But a house, now..."

"Especially under the circumstances..."

"Right on. Walking around, sleeping, taking a dump...there you go, taking a dump on the same toilet that this guy and his whole family used not a year ago...that would give me the creeps."

"I don't believe in ghosts, Detective Carrington." Ari removed the tea bag, placed it on the saucer, and sipped at his drink. It was recognizably tea, at least.

"Hey, you never know." The detective winced as though stung and reached under his jawline. He found some ketchup on top of his shaving cut. He wiped it off with his hand, then wiped his fingers halfheartedly on his napkin. "But even leaving out the ghosts, just the idea of it, you know, kind of takes the spice out of a new house."

Once again, he looked at his watch.

"If I'm keeping you from an appointment--" Ari began.

"No. Cops are always looking at their watches. There's not a whole lot else to do."

"Really?"

"That and eat doughnuts." He sounded perfectly serious. "Did you know what had happened in that house when you--"

"No."

"Well there you go. Tell the real estate agent to shove the contract up his ass and vamoose."

"Vamoose..."

"Get the hell out of there."

"Circumstances...make that impossible."

"You need a lawyer? I know a few. I could give you a hand on that."

"I'll bear it in mind." Ari fingered the handle of his cup. "I don't suppose you could answer any questions about the murders."

"Nothing that's not already in the papers." Carrington frowned down at his plate, as if weighing which to polish off first: the burger or the fries. "You wouldn't want to know more, anyway. Believe me."

"I was wondering about the back door. Don't you think crashing through like that would have made a tremendous racket?"

Carrington grunted.

It was a neutral sound. It should have conveyed nothing more than an acknowledgement of the question. Yet there was profound disparagement in it, not only of Ari, but in what he himself was doing. The detective was putting on an act, a very broad act, and he was suddenly growing tired of his own performance. His faced slackened, his chin drooped, the folds around his eyes deepened. He glanced at his watch again.

"We thought about that," he answered wearily, then forced down the last bite of his hamburger.

Ari waited. This was not a man to be pushed. It would only make him stubborn. Sensing Ari's gaze, he raised his head from his plate. "I said we thought about that."

"Mr. Riggins was found seated in the living room, correct? Was he wearing night clothes?"

"You mean pajamas? No. He..." Carrington stopped, considering his words, then slid the last two fries into his mouth.

"How were the others dressed? Were any of them bound? Were there signs of intoxication? Were any of them deaf? You see, the newspapers left quite a bit unexplained."

"Why are you so interested?"

"Wouldn't you be, if all of this had happened under your roof?"

Carrington crooked his finger at Mabel, who was chatting with the bartender. She came and took up his plate.

"Separate checks?"

Carrington nodded sluggishly. The waitress left to work up the bills.

"Detective--" Ari began.

"It wasn't 'your roof' at the time. Tell you the truth, if I found myself living in a haunted mansion, I'd shrug it off. But that's me. All wrapped up in my work. Speaking of which..." He shot Ari an inquiring look.

As if you didn't already know, Ari thought. "I work out of home."

"There all day?"

Ari was surprised by the question. The detective had already revealed too much

with his careless lack of subtlety. Now he was behaving as though Ari was blind, as if he could not see the challenge. It was open contempt.

"Naturally, I go out sometimes."

"Like where?"

"Detective, my presence in your country is perfectly legal."

"But you're not a citizen?"

"No."

"Going back home after you score your first million?"

"Possibly." Ari pressed his hands on the edge of the table and leaned forward--a gesture that begged for earnest reason. "Detective Carrington, I believe you were acquainted with the Riggins family."

"I already told you."

"They were your friends?"

Carrington looked at his watch.

"Did you participate in the investigation into the murders?" Ari persisted, feeling he had no option but to push the man.

"Yes."

"You were the primary investigator in the case?"

Carrington couldn't dodge the answer. "There's something about that in the papers."

"If you don't mind my saying, that seems a little odd."

"In your country, don't you take care of your own?" Carrington swiveled his glass back and forth, as though trying to screw it into the table.

"You were that close to them?" Ari lowered his eyes. "I apologize. I didn't understand."

"Don't apologize," Carrington sighed. "Listen, I know you're curious about what happened. That house you're in...I have good memories about it. Jerry...well, he was the best. You can see why it...okay, it hurts, seeing someone else move in."

"Especially a foreigner."

"I didn't say that. I mean, so we're at war with the Arabs--"

"With terrorists," Ari corrected.

"Yeah. Iraq and all."

"And to be specific, I'm Italian, of Arab descent."

"Sorry if I offended you."

Ari turned to the window and the dark street outside. A few pedestrians drifted by, looking aimless, homeless. He studied Carrington's sagging reflection in the glass. Was this sudden contrition part of his act? Or had he simply eaten too much?

The waitress returned with separate checks. A low buzz interrupted Carrington as he was calculating the tip. He scrounged beneath his stomach for his belt clip, a task made more arduous by the narrow seat, and took out his phone. He read a text message, frowned, then closed the cover with an angry flip of his finger.

Ari studied his check and drew out his credit card.

"You're going to use that for a cup of tea?" Carrington grouched. "That'll make Mabel's day."

"It's all I have."

"You mind?" Before Ari could answer, the detective had scooped up the card.

"What the hell's this? 'Bank of Nova Scotia?'"

"It's accepted here. I've used it several times."

"An Italian Arab in America with a Canadian credit card." Carrington made a broad gesture, as though wrapping the world in his arms, then handed the card back to Ari. "Put it away. Mabel has a thrombosis whenever she has to run one of these through. I'll cover it."

"Thank you."

"Per diem. Don't mention it."

Carrington put a ten and a five on the table and they left.

SIX

"Watch this," Omar chuckled to the policeman who had ordered Ghaith out of the white pickup truck and marched him to the canal bank. He pointed the way with the muzzle of an M-16, either stolen from or issued to him by the ever-helpful American army.

Set on automatic. No regard for marksmanship.

Omar nodded at one of the guards standing over the three prisoners brought from the back of the Kia Bongo truck. The prisoners were hooded, on their knees, their hands bound at the back. The guard returned Omar's nod and yanked the hood off the prisoner nearest him.

Ghaith stood silently while the bound man blinked around him. He was terrified when he saw the three guards from the mini-truck, their heads swathed in kuffiah scarves, but he said nothing. Ghaith stonily admired his mute courage. The prisoner was about thirty, a time when a man's strength ebbed in the stream of family and responsibility, when he had something to lose. The men standing guard over him were probably ten years younger, on average, than their captive. Poor, clueless, dangerous.

Omar, nearly forty, was an exception. It was hard to jibe him with the scruffy kid who screamed laughingly at incoming rockets during the Whirlwind War, somberly declared he would kill a million Iranians with his bare hands, then cried in outraged misery when his favorite shop ran out of sweets.

But how many of them hadn't changed? Ghaith doubted he would have

recognized young Ghaith, that astonishingly skeptical boy who took luck and disaster in stride, unconvinced that fear should be a ruler of souls. Only years later, on the Highway of Death, while American tank-busters roared with impunity overhead and men were roasted by the bushel all around him, did Ghaith finally have it beaten into his head that fear, on some occasions, was a valid guiding principal.

Ghaith had missed the key moment in Omar's transition from a pint-sized hellion to a dour takfiris--one of those self-appointed assassins (who had formed a kind of club of the self-anointed self-appointed) who took it upon themselves to decide who was righteous and who was not, with the intention of inflicting the ultimate penalty upon those found wanting.

Omar had been arrested and tortured under the old regime, but no more than anyone who wanted to wipe out most of mankind deserved. Ghaith had been in a position to check the file on his old chum, who had not exactly flourished as a killer of lukewarm Muslims. But he had a big mouth (hence his arrest), and when the new chaos came and all the restraints were thrown off he was ready to settle down to business and discard hope for his immortal soul. The takfiris understood that destroying people on a large scale might be misconstrued not only by their victims, but by the One True Power, as well. So be it, if that meant the salvation of humanity--or what was left after they were done with it.

Unfortunately, Ghaith had not understood any of this until Omar told him about the power shift in the Ministry and pulled a gun on him.

He arrived home at midnight--an iconic moment for this house. After placing a

kettle of water on the stove he changed into the jogging suit that served double duty as pajamas, switched the computer on, then returned downstairs. Packing a small wad of black Assam tea into his steeper, he dropped it into a coffee mug (*should I invest in a proper tea cup?*), and relished the brownish red swirls of infusion. He looked slightly devilish as lowered his head over the cup to savor the aromatic steam.

He rested the cup on the kitchen table (still the only furniture in the house aside from the computer desk and two smallish chairs), went to the back door, and studied the strip of clear tape he had stretched between the top of the door and the frame.

Broken.

With a satisfied chuckle he sat at the table and sipped his tea.

His complacency was disrupted by a faint thud. Upstairs, perhaps, but he couldn't be sure. Was it possible that he--or *they*--was still here? Lowering the cup onto the table, he rose and moved silently to the front of the house. Turning the corner to the living room, he saw a large yellow cat descending the stairs.

Ari bellowed with outrage. The cat stopped, as though amazed, then took off, squirting through the banister rails and vanishing into the den. Ari gave chase, racing into the den only to see the cat flitting into the kitchen, running into the kitchen only to see it scoot down the hall, taking the hall only to catch the briefest glimpse of it popping into the living room, arriving in the living room to see it complete the circle, bouncing up the stairs and disappearing from the top landing.

Ari followed. He stopped in the upstairs hallway and looked both ways. The doors to the Riggins boys' two bedrooms were closed, as were all the closets. That left the master bedroom, the bathroom, and what Ari thought of as the studio as possible

escape hatches. There was no furniture beyond the computer desk and office chair. No place for the animal to hide. It should be an easy matter to locate and evict it. Or strangle it and toss it in the garbage.

A single glance told him the master bedroom was clear. He went in anyway, to check the windows. Then came the bathroom and the studio. All the windows were closed, but where was the yellow devil? As he came out of the studio he saw the flick of a tail as the cat whipped downstairs and back into the living room.

Ari swore loudly and pounded down after it. He circled the rooms, then saw the door to the basement standing open. He hesitated at the top of the stairs, breathing hard. With another oath, this one lower, he went back into the kitchen and dropped into the chair. He would deal with the beast in his own good time.

After a few more sips of tea he was able to regain his equanimity. He dwelled on the possible identity of his unannounced visitor. He was fairly certain all the first floor windows were closed. There was an outside chance the cat had sneaked into the garage while Ari was pulling in, but he was certain he would have seen it spurt past his legs as he entered the kitchen hallway. Unless there was a large hole in the wall somewhere, the cat had to have entered with the intruder.

He had been sitting at the table for over five minutes when the cat appeared at the entrance of the kitchen. Ari restrained himself from leaping up immediately. He watched.

The cat stepped out cautiously onto the linoleum floor. It glanced at the refrigerator, then stopped when it spotted Ari. Having decided to wait and see what it did next, Ari did not move. It backed away very slowly, then stopped again, watching him.

After another minute, it sat and took a few long swipes at its fur with its tongue, shifted its front legs, then watched him some more. Seeing no more threatening gestures, it rose up and walked a few feet into the room before sitting back down to watch him some more. Once or twice it met Ari's eyes, after which it would look away, almost as if out of shyness--or insolence.

Ari nearly lost his self-control when the cat rose and leapt on the counter. He found it revolting to have the animal tread on the cutting board he used to divide his chicken. But he waited.

The cat sat on the cutting board and stared at the refrigerator. It obviously knew this was a place where food was stored. This was no feral animal but one wise in the ways of humans. A pet.

It meowed once, a short, almost harsh sound. Rising on its rear legs, it pressed its front paws high up on the side of the refrigerator and meowed again. Then it sat back down on the cutting board and stared at Ari.

"Don't tell me you haven't eaten in nine months."

On hearing a voice far less dangerous than the one Ari had used while chasing it, the cat rose, lifted its tail, and emitted a pigeon-like trill. It seemed healthy enough, in no way underfed. Ari drew out a Winston and lit up. He was still using the ash tray from the car.

He no longer felt so keen on throwing the cat out. It belonged here as much as he did. More so, maybe.

It jumped to the floor and put a prudent distance between them when Ari went to the refrigerator and took out the milk. He poured some into a saucer and placed the

saucer on the floor. The cat did not come. Ari reseated himself at the table and took up his cigarette. The cat approached the saucer, sniffed at the milk, then crouched and began to drink.

Ari finished his tea and smoke. The cat backed away when he stood and walked past the saucer.

"Smart cat," Ari nodded.

He stopped in the center of the dining room, then called out over his shoulder. "Hey cat, do you think they found what they were looking for?"

He had planned to do this the next day, opening the thick curtains and letting sunlight assist him in his search. But the chase had shaken off all trace of evening lethargy. He did a quick tour, looking for anything amiss, registering possible hiding places for future investigation. At first glance, in a house without furniture, there appeared to be few options.

Back in the living room, he took up the same speculative stance he had assumed on his first night, next to the invisible easy chair in which the body of Jerry Riggins had been discovered. The scene sprang to life--or death--in his mind. But there were too many gaps in his mental reconstruction. The Christmas tree--had there been gifts underneath it? Often Christians who celebrated the season put lights on their trees. Ari had seen this in pictures. Had there been lights on Jerry's tree? Had they been switched on? Had there been a fire in the fireplace? And there was the blood. How much was there? What was the splatter pattern like?

He looked again at the fireplace. Something was hanging down in the back. Ari had a reliable memory, and he didn't recall seeing that when he last stood here. Resting

on his haunches, he saw it was the chimney's damper handle. Ari went down on his hands and knees and leaned inside the hearth. Twisting his head, he tried to peer past the open damper and smoke shelf. Too dark. He reached inside as far as he could and encountered nothing more than the cool lining.

Pulling out, he began to knock his hands together, then stopped. They were still clean. Everything about the fireplace was clean. Not so much as a smudge on the log rack, the brass andiron, the little black poker, shovel and broom. He looked up to find the cat watching him from the bottom of the stairs.

"Ah. You're wondering, too. Why would the damper be open if the fireplace has never been used?"

Weariness overtook him. He went up to the studio to find the computer humming loudly in the bare, enclosed space. In the heat of the cat chase he had forgotten he had turned it on. Dropping into the chair, he went online and checked his email. He did not find it surprising to find a message in his inbox, but the heading startled him:

A FRIENDLY REMINDER.

He opened the message.

'Ted's Custom Lawn Care & Landscape Design Service wants to remind you that you will soon be due for a lawn manicure. Thank You!'

Ari glanced at the sender's address: tedslawncare.net.

Junk mail? Spam? Or some form of American humor?

He spent a few minutes perusing the news, the gruesome mayhem of bombings, shootings and beheadings in the Middle East. Then he logged off and lay down on his mattress, his bones settling in with a slight ache as he stretched out.

He was just drifting off when something tucked itself in the crook of his knees. He controlled his reflex with the memory of Carrington's glower as he read his text message in the restaurant. Was someone telling him that he had been unable to find the secret buried somewhere in the Riggins' house? Or could the message have been:

"The cat got in."

The cat was kneading the mattress, purring softly. Ari let it stay, accommodating himself as best he could.

SEVEN

When Omar called him earlier that evening, and Ghaith asked how he had gotten his private office number, Omar explained that a mutual friend, a leading member of a prominent shura, had given it to him in strictest confidence. All hell had broken loose in the country, but the Ministry was well-protected from looting. Americans stood guard outside the complex in Central Baghdad, just as they had sent their army to fend off plunderers at the Ministry of Oil. Ghaith had not been forced to relocate, and under the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq, the old phone numbers were still operable. It was quite possible that Omar had formed an odd allegiance to the imam, a well-known Twelver Ghaith had met years earlier. Just to be on the safe side, Ghaith called up someone he knew well, an assistant imam. He confirmed that Omar was a follower of the moderate cleric.

Omar showed up in a white Toyota pickup—only borrowed, he told Ghaith, but the policeman riding shotgun in the back added a kind of official sanction to the mysterious proceedings. The circle seemed complete. Omar's youthful craving for martyrdom had been defeated by the younger Omar's craving for sweets. When Ghaith opened the truck door, Omar held up a bag of lu'mat al-adi, laughing.

"Remember?"

For a moment, they were boys again. Omar removed one of the sticky pastries from the cellophane bag, took a bite, and handed the remaining half to Ghaith, who grinned and finished it off in one bite.

If Ghaith had known that Minister of Interior Falah al-Naqib (Sunni, and a bit of

a media hound) was being ousted to make way for the more silent (and sinister) Baqir Jabr al-Zubeidi, a Shia, he would have been infinitely more circumspect. If he had gone with Omar at all, he would have arranged for an armed escort. But who would have accompanied him? The MNSTC-I didn't have enough men to do more than hold their ground against the looters. And local Iraqi alliances had radically changed overnight. Ghaith had been caught flat-footed. It was someone in the Ministry who had supplied Omar with his phone number, of that Ghaith was now certain. And the assistant imam Ghaith had called must be in on the plot, must have been waiting for Ghaith to contact him so he could confirm Omar's legitimacy.

After all that's happened, it's only to be expected...one can only be so clever, so lucky, before history gravitates towards the overabundance of good fortune and smashes the game....

"Come on, Ghaith. Rifle through that file cabinet of yours." Omar tapped Ghaith on the side of the head, then pointed at the unhooded man kneeling on the ground. "Who is he?"

Ghaith did not answer.

"I've told my brothers about your photographic memory. Don't make me look like a fool."

Akhee. 'My brother'. Always 'my brothers'. Brothers in arms, band of brothers, blood brothers, daisy chain brothers. There is as much blood relation here as between an ox and an eel. Doesn't matter. Plumbers, beggars, jihadists--all brothers in kind. The U.S. Army's motto is more accurate. 'An Army of One'. That's it. You're on your own, with only your own sweet ass to kiss good-bye.

Omar smiled tensely. He was not concerned with looking foolish. He was, Ghaith decided, screwing up his courage.

The little rat-mouth can't still think of me as an old friend, can he?

"Hey! You! Asshole! I'm talking to you!"

Ari had no doubt that the man was speaking to him. He had been discreetly urinating in the bushes when this rude madman burst through. Not believing in putting off business, Ari continued to pee.

"Do you hear me!" the man screamed. "I can't believe it! There are children around here!"

The last child Ari had seen had been over a mile back on the main trail. He had chosen a narrow, half-overgrown side path to empty his swollen bladder. Even then, he had stepped half a dozen yards into the undergrowth to guarantee privacy. Back in his homeland, where a man found the nearest convenient corner to piss in, he was considered a bit of a prude because of his delicacy in this matter. It had nothing to do with timidity and everything to do with public hygiene. The city and outlying villages stank enough without him adding his few ounces to the mess.

The woods seemed a perfectly reasonable venue for relieving himself, screened off from women and little girls, and a perfect absorbent for natural human waste. It was just his bad luck to encounter a lunatic. He finished peeing and rolled up the front of his jogging pants.

The lunatic retreated a short distance as Ari stepped through the brambles and onto the path. He only now saw Ari's face, and was busy reassessing the situation.

Foreigners were more common in the outlying counties than in Richmond proper, Ari had noted. Sometimes, in a checkout line or on a street corner, he saw the same flicker of uncertainty or outright fear--and occasionally loathing--that made Americans overseas so disruptive, if sometimes amusing. But most of the locals seemed to accept the presence of Chinese and Indians and (above all) Hispanics in their midst. There weren't that many Arabs yet, though, not this far south. Perhaps a few thousand in the immediate area. Ari wondered if the outraged jogger would conclude he was Punjabi. Or Sikh. Or a member of that relatively new race: a Terrorist.

Why not? We all look the same to them.

"You don't do that here," the jogger admonished, no longer screaming, but scolding. "There are public toilets."

Ari had tried to use the facilities at a nature center further up the trail, only to find the building locked. Peering through a plate glass window, he saw a marine turtle moping in a fish tank and some fanciful children's drawings of various animals on a bulletin board next to the entrance. Otherwise, the interior was dark. Ari had encountered this manifestation before. Americans were very good at stockpiling material in great abundance, then locking it all up. Everything for the record, none for use.

The jogger was into the second phase of his assessment, his eyes running up and down Ari's baggy jogging pants and sweaty gray shirt. They compared poorly with his own natty outfit. The logos on his shirt and striped shorts matched, while his immaculate running shoes appeared to have an inch of cushion. He was a brand name. He belonged. Whereas Ari (and his renegade penis) was fraught with anonymity. Was he homeless? Or that worst of all conjunctions: foreign and destitute--with nothing to lose? In other

words, was he dangerous?

"There's a shelter for..."

Ari raised his brow inquiringly.

"They have toilets. You can even take a shower." He chose to interpret Ari's silence as a query. "It's three or four miles from here, across the river. Next to the city jail...I hear."

"I am not a peasant," Ari said with grim civility. Feeling a twinge in his calf, he braced his hands on one knee and stretched out his leg. When he straightened, the other jogger was gone.

It was his own fault, he thought. He had been living in a state of semi-savagery, sleeping in his jogging suit, eating junk food, neglecting his appearance. He had neither showered nor shaved this morning, putting off his toilette until he'd taken his morning run. Which only made sense, but which also helped explain why the man treated him like some alien cast-off.

But it did nothing to alleviate Ari's sense of outrage. He had done well in his country, so well that there was an assumption among some that his good fortune was simply that, plums that had fallen out of the sky into his lap. True, luck had been involved. But few understood how hard he had worked, the risks he had taken, the fragility of the thread from which he dangled. And with the final toss of the dice, he had lost all. Not that he had had much choice. Nor was he by any means the only one to have found a desert where, only a day before, there had been lush pastures. Which made the man's reaction to his uncovered presence all the more galling. He had reprimanded Ari out of ignorance. He had *screamed* out of ignorance. And Ari wondered, as he

jogged the several miles back to Beach Court, if he should have broken the idiot's jaw.

No. You did well. Doing something like that might draw attention.

An unpleasant odor greeted him inside the house. It seemed to be coming from upstairs. Going up, he found his thin blanket balled up at the end of the mattress. A nudge of his foot exposed feces and a large wet patch that could only be urine.

The cat must have predicted Ari's reaction, because it was nowhere to be found. What a clever beast, to find a hiding spot where none existed.

Only we both know that's not true, don't we?

His wrath slowly receded, like a slow-moving thunderstorm disappearing over the horizon. After all, he reasoned, the cat was only guilty of a cultural misstep similar to the one Ari had apparently made in James River Park. Locked inside the house, it had used the nearest thing at hand that approximated loose soil.

His primitive bed was now unusable. The mattress was thin and folded easily, along with the blanket, in the large trash can (Waste Management Systems grandiosely stenciled on its green flank) sitting outside the garage.

He took a quick shower, shaved.

He dressed.

His suit looked rumpled in the bathroom mirror.

A major shopping spree was called for. He had a \$3,000 credit limit. Prudence dictated limited expenditure. How much would, say, \$600 buy?

As he raised the garage door a pickup truck pulling a trailer entered his driveway. The driver saw that Ari was about to leave and backed away to the street. After parking at the curb, he hopped out and walked up the slight rise.

"Mr. Ciminon?"

Ari nodded. "You must be Ted. It says so on your truck."

"Actually, I'm Fred." The young man stuck out his hand. "I just work for Ted."

"I received an email--"

"All taken care of."

"I don't understand."

"I tried calling ahead, but no one answered."

"I went jogging."

"And didn't take your cell phone with you," Fred clucked, as though Ari had committed a major faux pas. His second that morning. "That's all right. I'll just run my little Toro around here a bit and trim a few hedges and I'll be out of your hair."

"I never requested this service," Ari said.

"It's all under contract," the young man answered with an annoying combination of servility and confidence. "You just go about your business. We'll do fine."

"Uh, Fred," Ari called out as the man turned and headed back to his truck.

Fred turned. "Yes?"

"Your uniform."

Fred, puzzled, glanced down at his carpenter jeans, then tucked his chin for a look at the name stitched on his shirt pocket: Fred, in flowing cursive. He raised his head.

"I'm sorry?"

"It's quite...immaculate."

Their eyes met. Fred held his gaze a fraction too long. He grinned broadly and chuckled, looking away. "It's under contract, too!"

Ari smiled, nodded, and returned to the garage. As he backed his Scion down the driveway, Fred waved for him to stop. Ari lowered his passenger window and Fred leaned down.

"About these," he said, nodding at the flowers and wreath clustered around the mailbox post. "You don't want me to get rid of them, do you?"

"You can leave them," Ari said.

Fred gave him a sad smile and turned away.

"Uh...wait!" Ari called after him. "I've changed my mind. You may get rid of them. All of them."

Ari brushed off Fred's dismay with a wave of his hand. "There will be more, soon enough. Fresh ones."

Fred gave him a long look, then said, "Nice car!"

Ari glowered and pulled away.

America, Land of Shops and Shoppers. Ari had been astonished when, only a few days after 9/11, the President of the United States had stood before the people of this great land and announced the sure cure for global terrorism:

"Go shopping."

Ari had gone barely a mile down Midlothian Turnpike before he spotted a men's clothing store and negotiated a turn into a strip mall parking lot.

"Ah, yes," a salesman said appreciatively as Ari walked in. "Just the shark for my sharkskin."

Ari gave him an 'I beg your pardon' lift of the brow.

“I have a real bargain from Vanetti, just the thing for hot summer days,” the salesman said, guiding Ari to a rack near a fitting room and a trio of mirrors. He looked the prospective customer up and down and removed a gray three-button suit, holding it up to the side of Ari's chest. “Polyester and rayon blend, very cool. Classic center venting, with pleated pants. Of course we have this style in wool, too. It will be getting chilly in this neck of the woods in a month or so.”

Ari fingered the material. Adequate. He noticed the chalk marks on the unfinished pants cuffs and sighed. “I need something right away.”

The salesman sighed, too, as though forming a duet of disappointment with his client. “That limits our options somewhat.” He hesitated, then said, “I hope you won't take offence, but...your English is very good.”

“Cambridge,” Ari said.

“Ah! I thought I detected a trace of English English.”

Ari smiled.

The salesman tapped his lower lip, then held out his hand. “Do you mind?”

“Please.”

The salesman pinched Ari's pinstripe jacket and rubbed the fabric between his fingers. “This is very fine.”

“This? I wore it at work.”

“This?”

“At the Casino du Liban.”

“That's...” The salesman's eyes widened. “In Lebanon? Beirut?”

“Actually, it's in Jounieh, about twenty kilometers outside the city. They're

famous for their Maronite Catholics.”

“Those Catholics love to gamble!” the salesman barked--then closed his mouth. “I’m sorry. You aren’t by any chance...” Then he frowned. “Didn’t all the casinos close down? I thought I heard something about that...”

“Casino du Liban reopened years ago, after the civil war. But because of the recent troubles with Syria, there’s been some readjustments in the staff.”

“Hard times?”

Palm down, Ari brought his hand up to the salesman and the inch of pinstripe still between his fingers. “As you can tell, this has seen better days.”

"Yes, but...the thread count must be tremendous. Barbera? Piana?"

"Marzotto."

"Oh my," the salesman wailed lowly. "I'm afraid we don't have anything like that here. You would have to go to New York to find something like this. Or Rome!"

"I certainly don't have time for that."

"Of course not, of course not." Making a sound that combined a snort with a laugh, the salesman said, "You could take a look at Macy's Donald Trump Collection."

The salesman showed Ari a few more suits and combinations, but his attitude was halfhearted. It was like showing the Queen of England a collection of Tupperware. When Ari made it clear even these modestly priced items were beyond his current means, he dropped all pretense.

"I suppose you'll be wanting Wal-Mart, then. This is as low as we go."

Ari had seen at least a dozen Wal-Marts, or signs directing shoppers to Wal-Marts, during his drive south. He had concluded that it was some kind of department

store chain.

"They sell suits?"

"Allegedly." The salesman was courteous, but obviously put out. "*Chinese* suits, strictly off the rack. You'll probably need a tailor, to take out the shoulders."

"Can you tell me where the nearest Wal-Mart is?"

The salesman told him. Then, his sense of self-promotion completely shattered, at least for what remained of the morning, he added: "Too bad, too bad. My suits would have looked so good on you. You put my mannequins to shame."

Ari glanced toward the display window. All of the mannequins were blue.

Two hours later Ari unloaded his wardrobe. The George suit and slacks (Bulgarian, not Chinese) went onto new plastic hangers, as did his three new shirts, an additional pair of pants, a dark blue sports jacket, and two ties. On the overhead shelf he placed underwear, socks, a fresh jogging suit, and a proper pair of pajamas.

He then pumped up the inflatable mattress and pillow that he had gotten from the sports department. Hopefully, it would prove more resistant to the cat's whimsical bladder. He would bring out his new blanket at bedtime.

The cat greeted him in the kitchen, as though it knew Ari had gone to additional expense on its behalf.

"Sphinx," Ari said before knocking it off the counter. The cat began to run away, but stopped when it heard Ari pop open a can of Special Kitty. "That's your new name. Get used to it."

He put several scoops of Mixed Grill into a plastic dish decorated with paw prints.

Sphinx came forward, its tail whisking the air. Ari knew dogs well, certain types of dogs, but they had been handled by men whose training was every bit as specialized as that of the dogs in their care. Of cats he knew next to nothing. He had no idea if he was giving Sphinx too little or too much. His first inclination was to give nothing at all. Pushing his cart through the Wal-Mart pet department, he was left to wonder if any of these American pets earned their keep. With so many varieties of pet food available, would any cat feel inclined to expend energy on a mouse?

"And I have something else for you," he told Sphinx.

After setting the dish on the floor, he pulled out a kitty litter box. He'd had a bit of luck at the store. A woman had spotted him putting the box and cat food in his cart, and then a bag of cedar shavings on top. She asked him if he had a hamster.

"What's that?" Ari asked.

"Something like a rat."

"Certainly not!"

"Then I think this is what you want..." And she had directed him to the kitty litter.

Ari filled the kitty litter box and took it to the downstairs bathroom. Returning to the kitchen, he swept the cat away from the dish, carried it to the bathroom, and dropped it in the fresh litter.

"This is your toilet. You will use it. You will not--"

Sphinx fled.

Ari had seen the slip of paper on his kitchen table when he first entered, a receipt from Ted's lawn service, stamped PAID. It confirmed what he already suspected, but he

doubted 'Fred' was the same person who had come in through the back door last night. Fred was advertising the fact that he had been in the house.

Ari learned the meaning of the implied message when he went upstairs to switch on his computer. A flash drive had been inserted in the USB port at the back of the screen.

'Time to get to work,' could not have been spoken more plainly.

The folder on the flash drive was full of jpg files--over a hundred of them. He clicked on the first one and his image viewer opened automatically.

Ari put aside the bag of Fritos he had brought with him and turned the mouse wheel, bringing up the second digital photo, then the next. At the sixth picture he stopped.

“Ah, Abu Yaqoub.... When did you start playing with sharp objects?”

There was no need to zoom in, but he did.

No mistake.

He paused to consider his next move. According to his new job description, he should immediately shoot off an email. But when the opportunity presented itself--and God knew he had plenty of empty hours on his hands--the wise course was to sit back and calculate. What would be the consequences if he sent the email? If he didn't? Who benefited, who lost?

But in this case, the ramifications were plain and simple. Nor was this a time to make outrageous demands of his employer, on only his third day in the franchise. He sat up, opened a second window, and logged on to his email account. He had only to type in the letter 'u' for the complete address to drop down in the address box.

He wrote:

'Picture No. 6, third from right. Abu Khalid Yusuf al-Kayid. Mid-thirties. No distinguishing marks. Arab. Thief. Part of the mass release of 2002. The last I knew of him, he had apparently come up in the world. He had moved to Kadhimiya, near the Shrine of Imam Musa al-Kadhim. Used to be a safe neighborhood until you kindly improved it. Work history unknown, but has obviously acquired a new job skill.'

Ari paused. This last was a bit of editorial sarcasm that exceeded the parameters set out for him. He decided to leave it. His employers having little sense of humor, they would undoubtedly ascribe it to an ineradicable cultural deviation. He continued:

'Religious affiliation: cannot recall. Probably none. He did not do this out of conviction. No doubt was paid by parties unknown. He would also make a first-class alassa. He would rat out anyone--I believe that's the phrase. Cannot recall details about his family, but this kunya should give you a clue. He was known to associate with Feisel al-Amiri, a well-known businessman (I believe you would call him a 'fence') near the gold market. Yusuf was not known to be particularly dangerous before. As you can see, that has changed. Just as Kadhimiya has changed.'

The cursor hovered over the Send button for only a moment.

"So much for Abu Yaqoub," Ari murmured, and clicked.

He returned to the images. As he scrolled through the files, his face began to sag. The loss. The enormous loss. Was it necessary? Inevitable? Even preferable?

He froze. Ghostly voices were calling to him from down the hallway. That they were summoned by his own imagination did not make them any less real.

EIGHT

Omar still believed the best solution for the ills of the world verged on universal destruction. Otherwise he wouldn't be here, with Ghaith, with these other prisoners. His compatriots might have other motives--long-standing grudges or basic religious hatred. They might be undergoing a gang initiation, or be ignorant pawns of rival factions. They could be here simply because they were being paid to be here. But Omar, Ghaith sensed, was still a low-class blowhard. Circumstances dictated that he must act upon his avowed convictions or be seen as a coward. Someone in the Ministry had played Omar like a harp. Who could that be? Anyone. In the current environment, it would be no exaggeration to suspect everyone. That would explain why Ghaith had heard no hint of the power shift in the Ministry. Conspiracy as a social movement. Americans might dismiss it as a passing fad.

"There's no such thing as eidetic memory," Ghaith said.

"Always the scholar!" Omar complained mildly. "I never could understand half of what you said."

"He didn't talk like that back in the truck," the policeman groused. He gave a little jump of horror when Ghaith shot him an erotic purse of the lips.

"Never mind that," said Omar, who had not seen the airline kiss. He nodded at the third guard. "Get it."

The guard shouldered his Kalashnikov and went to the back of the truck. When he pulled out a long, curved blade that shined in the headlights.

"Why Omar, you've been looting the Baghdad Museum," Ghaith snorted. "I

thought that was you I saw on television."

The ghost voices alerted him to the fact that he had neglected a vital purchase during his morning spree. He had seen nothing but wine, beer and some awful looking flavored fizzies at the grocery stores he had visited. Even Wal-Mart was not all-encompassing when it came to hard spirits. Using the online Yellow Pages, Ari located the nearest liquor store. It was called an 'ABC'. He found that droll, sounding as it did like a shop that provided educational supplies for schoolchildren.

Within half an hour, he had returned with three bottles of Jack Daniels. He lined them up on the floor next to the computer desk and stared at them fondly, almost in wonder. While standing in line at the liquor store, the clerk had asked him if he was planning a party.

"Excuse me?" Ari had said.

"Your smile," the amiable clerk answered. "It's like you're expecting company."

"I'm enjoying the freedom," Ari said. "Where I come from, you would have lost your head for selling this."

The clerk's own smile faded and he quickly checked Ari through.

He took up one bottle, broke the seal, and wafted the opening back and forth under his nose. Then he poured about two inches into an eight-ounce glass and took his first drink since....

It had been a long time.

He tapped the mouse and the screensaver (a realistic image of a fantastical poppy field that had never existed, not on this planet) dropped away--revealing Digital Image

No. 33, a horrible scene that should not ever have existed on *any* planet. He sipped at his drink slowly. The warmth felt good. And it helped.

It helped so much that, nearly three hours and five emails later, he had absorbed half of the first bottle. He knew he was close to being drunk--perhaps *was* drunk. He was so unaccustomed to alcohol that he found it difficult to gauge its impact, especially after he had guzzled a good portion of it.

It had grown dark outside. He had earned his keep for the day. He was about to call it quits when his wavering eyes fell on Digital Image No. 56. He stared at it a long time.

He began an email, perused the opening sentence for a minute or so, then deleted it, unsent. He began another, and then another, with the same result.

He stretched his aching back, glanced around, saw that Sphinx had sprawled itself out on the camper mattress.

"It's just you and myself now, isn't it?"

Sphinx glanced at him through slit eyes, gave a kind of feline, slightly venomous shrug, and resumed its nap.

Ari began a new email, one guaranteed to displease his employer. It was not informative. Nor was it the chatty plaint of a foreign soul stranded alone in a strange land. It was demanding. It was overboard. It was, to some degree, the liquor talking--but only a little. Even as he sent it (without hesitation), he doubted the people on the other end would comply. On the other hand, he wasn't asking this *gratis*. He had a very fat target for their scope. He would be glad to put him in harm's way if (as he said in the email: "and only if") his employer gave him what he wanted.

Satisfied, he logged off, gave Sphinx a brief, unwanted pat on the head, and took his bottle and glass outside to the gazebo.

Beach Court ended on a small bluff above the James River, but the Riggins property sloped all the way down to the water's edge. Easing onto the gazebo's wooden bench, he leaned his back against the railing and allowed what tension Jack Daniels had neglected to drain from his limbs.

The darkness was not complete. Porch lights from distant houses across the river were reflected in tiny broken flecks on the water, while intermittent, tiny beams burst through the trees from his neighbors to either side, one facing the James, the other, Howie's, further up the hill.

Howie had told him the neighboring waterfront property belonged to someone named Mackenzie. Ari had seen their mailbox, at the entrance to a driveway that swept deep into the woods behind Howie's yard before turning towards the river.

A series of splashes was followed by plaintive honks. It sounded too deep-throated for a duck. He'd look into it tomorrow. How much would a book on birds set him back?

The liquor, at least, was inexpensive--and of high quality. As were the cigarettes, he mentally saluted as he lit a Winston. No black market gouging here, no furtive exchanges of too much for too little. And that was for just a bit of extra food. Forget risking your neck for a pack of extra-toxic DJ coffin nails at the Shorgia market or a bottle of stomach reflux brewed in the marshes. America was a good place for the simpler sins, although Ari found all the No Smoking signs problematic. Next thing you knew, they'd be issuing *fatāwā* against the grand old weed. Perhaps they had already

begun.

A not-distant rumble marked the beginning of the rapids Ari had seen from Lee Bridge on his arrival. A sound that would probably recede from conscious awareness after a week or so of living nearby. But Ari found that it somehow punctuated a hollow ache around his heart. He had been too busy acclimating himself to his new country to pay much attention to it. When the busyness stopped, however, and unavoidable memories throbbed to the forefront, all of his crimes and misjudgments came crowding up to shout in his face. If only he had.... If only he had not....

A friend of his with a philosophical bent once told him America's top export was the sense of personal loneliness. They lured people into a corral of self-absorption, a circle of screens and mirrors. It was every man for himself, but with much of the danger removed. The problem with such exports was that they did not always adapt to the new market, reducing it instead to every-man-for-himself, but with the danger still intact.

The friend with the philosophical bent was as good as dead. Perhaps he had not been a friend. For all Ari knew, he might have been his mortal enemy all along. It was hard to say, anymore. So much certainty removed....

And now this old friend was just one more ache in his chest, and the river emphasized the loss with the rushing boom of its passing.

One thing for certain, though, Ari thought as he looked back at the house. The sound was not nearly loud enough to mask a sledgehammer pounding against a back door.

He was distracted by a bright flash above the river. A moment later a loud *crack* echoed across the water and rippled down the south bank. Howie had said kids stood on

the tiny island and lit off firecrackers. He had not said that they did it after dark. From the perspective of his forty-odd years, Howie had transformed young adults into children. Ari looked at his watch and was unpleasantly surprised to find that it was already past 11. By passing the time with Jack Daniels, he had lost an entire evening. He tried to remember if he had fed Sphinx.

Turning to the house again, he followed the hidden trajectory of the killer, or killers. Center left, downstairs picture window. If the window curtains had been open, a kayaker taking a brisk spin on a cold December night might have seen the flash of gunfire in the living room. Ari leaned down so that he could see the second floor beyond the gazebo roof. The master bedroom windows could also be clearly seen from the river.

It was suddenly darker than a moment before. It looked as though the Mackenzie porch light had been switched off. A flash and report announced the launching of another Whistling Jupiter from the island, which was completely invisible at this time of night.

The Mackenzie light came on.

Then went off.

Then came on again.

A kind of smirking sorrow filled Ari. He gave a snort, then poured another snort. Tricks. Everywhere, tricks. You could tabulate the world population by counting all the people who had outsmarted themselves. And he should know. He was a genius at it.

Should he go inside and put a seal on this little plot of innocence? What the Mackenzies were up to in the middle of the night was none of his business. But he did not move. He would add to his knowledge of the foibles of his new land. He was also curious to know if the rocket man out on the water was using night vision goggles. Even

here, where the water was calm, a collision with a rock or driftwood could capsize a kayak or canoe.

Besides...perhaps it was his business, after all.

Once he decided to remain outside, he tested the option of creeping up on the Mackenzie house. The trees seemed thick enough to provide cover. But after taking a few strides toward the edge of the yard he about-faced back to the gazebo bench. Three-quarters of a bottle of whiskey had not stifled the cold, inner observer that weighed the odds and enforced decisions. It was too dark, and he had drunk too much, to guarantee a stealthy approach.

He didn't see the two-man kayak until it slid into the faint aura of light from the Mackenzie porch about thirty yards from the shore. It was a little larger than the ones Ari had seen doodling on the river the last couple of days. The two men drew their doubled-edged paddles out of the water.

"Product!" one of the called out.

Someone must have signaled from the Mackenzie yard. The kayakers vanished behind the tree border as they stroked to the beach. There being nothing to see, Ari leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping to catch a few more words. But all he heard were a few indecipherable murmurs. He swore lowly, blaming Jack Daniels for his deafness. He took another sip.

The kayak remained out of sight for nearly ten minutes. Negotiation (if any) and the exchange of money for 'product' should take no more than a moment, especially for the kind of transaction Ari was certain was taking place.

He had not turned on his own porch light, but the kayakers would have seen the

faint glow filtering through the thick living room curtains.

Someone's moved into the Riggins house?

Yes.

Know anything about them?

No.

Obviously, such a conversation would take all of three seconds. What else were they talking about? The weather? No, the kayakers would not linger for banal chitchat.

He tried to interpret the tone of the murmurs. Not much there, either. They were perfectly neutral, containing neither laughter nor argument. It sounded as if only two men were talking. One of the kayakers was not participating in the discussion. Still squatting in the boat, maintaining his position in the water. A portable escape hatch.

And then a woman's voice chimed in, clear as a bell.

"No, there's someone living there. I saw him the other day. A fucking A-rab. He was in a jogging suit. A fucking A-rab jogger!"

Ari smiled. The silly woman was completely smashed, a fact confirmed by her shrill laughter.

Mr. Mackenzie must have told her to tone it down. Her reaction was predictably belligerent.

"Fuck you! It's a free country!"

Ari mentally wagged a finger at the invisible woman, in part for her language and in part for her assertion. Outside of nationalistic propaganda, he had yet to see or hear of a free country, now or ever. Above all, though, he silently admonished her for the way she spoke to her husband.

The voices subsided. Ari found himself urging Mrs. American Freedom to speak up again and assert her right to row drunkenly, even at the price of male embarrassment. She did not let him down.

"You've got to be shitting me! No way! The first we heard about it was in the papers."

Some harsh skeptical sounds followed, probably from the kayak spokesman.

"You think we'd do something like that?" Mrs. Mackenzie shot back. "You're out of your fucking mind!"

"No, no, no, I didn't say..." The male voice drifted off on a light breeze.

Why were they only talking about this now? If the kayakers thought the Mackenzies had had something to do with the murders, bringing it up nine months later did not serve any purpose. Blackmail made no sense. If the kayakers had seen something, they would have leapt on it immediately, threatening to lead the police to fresh evidence. By waiting so long they would have made themselves accomplices.

"What if *you* did it, huh?" Mrs. Mackenzie screeched. "You were out here that night! Right? Right?"

Ari hoped the woman would not be smacked into silence. She was providing the only open window on the topic at hand. She had certainly provided him with an interesting morsel. The kayakers had indeed been cruising the James the night of the murders. But this posed the same problem. Why wait so long to make the accusation?

Because no one had lived in the house all this time? Why should that matter? Unless the house itself was what triggered the argument.

Sphinx, you're going to have to start earning your keep. This might be America,

land of the coddled cats, but your new master is not American. He expects pets to work for a living.

"Okay, okay! I've had a few drinks, okay? Is that a crime?"

Well, Ari thought, fingering his glass...yes. And no. Hard to say, especially after a few drinks.

"I said I'm fucking sorry, all right?"

She sounded more drunk than convinced. And then, for the first time, Ari obtained a clear take on the voice of Mr. Mackenzie:

"Hey Dude, she's drunk! Okay! We're cool!"

Cool as a razor off the strap, Ari smirked. This was really wonderful. He couldn't wait for fine weather. He needed to talk to Detective Carrington. He needed to talk to the kayakers. And for both discussions, a clear sky and calm waters were necessary.

He watched as the kayak, black as coal and sleek as a reed, vanished out of the halo of the Mackenzie's porch light.

NINE

The unhooded prisoner turned and cringed when he saw the scimitar. He lost control of his bladder. Courage could only carry him so far.

"There's no need for this," Ghaith sighed. "He's not worth your trouble. Besides, where's your video setup? Don't you people usually film these things?"

"Not in this case." Omar looked at him closely. "Why isn't he worth our trouble?"

Well...maybe it will help.

"Aziz Shahrستاني, a veteran of the first war against the Americans. He fell on hard times during the embargo and was caught pilfering...I don't know what, exactly." Ghaith closed his eyes for a moment, matching the face to the file. "During his stay in Abu Ghraib he met with a little accident during interrogation, losing the small finger..."

"Which one?" Omar asked.

"Both of them."

"I noticed that when I tied him up," one of the guards said.

"And there is no way Ghaith could have seen them," Omar said, meaning the prisoner's bound hands had been out of sight the whole time.

Aziz Shahrستاني's dread lifted momentarily. He was staring at Ghaith.

"Do I know you?"

Ghaith shook his head.

"But he knows you," Omar said, turning back to Ghaith. "So what they told me is true."

"Now you know. I'm a clerk, I file things away."

"You supervised the Ministry database," Omar added.

"There were many databases...at least, until the fall," Ghaith observed, giving a mocking glance at the scimitar. "Before the Americans got there, the looters took every last computer server and paper clip."

"Everything but this." Omar once again tapped his old friend on the side of the head. "I see now why the Ministry wants you dead. They want to start from a clean slate."

"And these...?" Ari nodded at the bound prisoners.

"They meet the same fate," said Omar harshly. "They were caught helping the Americans."

"Not me," Ghaith shook his head.

"It's only a matter of time." Omar made a swooping motion with his arm. Using both arms, the guard raised the scimitar over his head.

"Don't move," he told the first prisoner. "That would only make it more painful."

The next morning the rain came. Cats and dogs, was the meaningless analogy in English.

Ari scratched Detective Carrington and the kayakers from his To Do List, at least for that day. Which was just as well. He wasn't feeling particularly sharp. Gulping down cup after cup of hot tea, he spent his pre-noon hours squinting at his computer screen.

There was no need to purchase a bird guide. He found what he needed at

Wikipedia. Whoever was monitoring his browser would be stumped by his sudden fascination with geese. Particularly interesting was the tidbit about the Capitoline geese, who alerted the ancient Romans when the Gauls were sneaking up on their last citadel in 390 B.C. The Empire might have been snuffed in its cradle, leaving the world to the Persians and fucking A-rabs. The geese outside the master bedroom window (although he couldn't see them with the rain bashing against the panes) were Canadian. Many had abandoned the tribulations of migration and taken up permanent residence in the Chesapeake Bay and on the James River.

Leaving off avian research, Ari checked his email. Nothing. He hadn't expected a reaction from his employer this soon, one way or another.

Sphinx seemed to have nothing better to do than to take up space on his camper mattress. Ari swiveled in his office chair and gave the cat a baleful eye. Sensing it was being observed, Sphinx opened its own eyes to find a menacing scowl directed its way. The cat stretched leisurely and seemed on the verge of going back to sleep when Ari stomped his foot on the wood floor. Sphinx jumped up, pupils wide with alarm. Ari stood. Finally recognizing the threat, Sphinx ran out the studio door, Ari hot behind it.

Sphinx flew straight for the stairs. Bleary-eyed, his temples pounding, Ari nearly went head over heels as he tried to leap several steps at one go, only saving himself by grabbing hold of the handrail.

"Sphinx!" he shouted. "I'll skin you alive!"

He stopped and steadied himself.

"If I don't break my neck, first."

There was no sound. With a grunt, he proceeded with yet another search of the

house. On the first floor he double-checked closets, stomped for hollows in the floor, tapped on the trim work to make sure it was secure. A small makeshift door the size of four playing cards laid out in a rectangle opened up on a water valve, which apparently controlled the line to the bibcock out front. Squeezing his arm past the pipe, Ari ran his hand along the floor behind the wall. There was something grainy at the bottom of the frame. Drawing out, he found his fingertips coated with white powder. He sniffed at it gingerly. It was gypsum that had rained off the sheetrock during the construction of the house, plus something else. Some kind of oil. It reminded him of cosmoline.

"Here, Sphinx. Be a good girl. Talk to me. Meow...meow..."

In the basement he tapped at the wall paneling. Here and there he struck a hollow spot. It would be an easy matter to pull out a section and bury something in the insulation. But if the idea had occurred to him, it would have occurred to whoever else had searched the house over the last nine months. He scrutinized the heads of the small brown panel nails, but it was impossible to say if they had been tampered with. Besides, the theoretical searcher could have easily bought new nails to hammer the panels back into place. In any event, the cat had no access to the gaps in the walls--at least, none that Ari could find.

He went into the kitchen and opened a can of cat food. He tapped a spoon on the edge of the can, a signal Sphinx had already learned to recognize. But Ari had thrown too much of a scare into it. With a sigh of resignation that merged effortlessly with the rain hissing on the roof, he doled out a couple of clumps into the cat dish. The water had gone down in the second dish. He topped it off.

Squeezed between a Big Lots and a lawyer who specialized in divorces and traffic injuries--two very similar types of accidents--Moria's Notions was a nondescript niche in an anonymous cluster of shops along the mishmash of malls on Broad Street, itself a salute to indiscriminate entrepreneurship. Shoppers were undeterred by the weather, with every car shooting off hip-high water wings, splashing themselves and other cars (there were no pedestrians to spatter, which Ari found enormously odd, even spooky). Shop-hopping was the universal pastime, and few stores were excluded from the itinerary.

Moria's Notions seemed to be one of them. Sitting in his car, working himself up for a dash across the parking lot, Ari saw no one coming out or going in--unlike the Big Lots next door, which attracted throngs of bargain-hunters.

In the time it took him to reach the overhang, a pair of girls had slipped out of the shop door and were scratching cigarettes out of a battered soft pack. Ari thought they had been severely beaten, until a closer look revealed the bruises to be black lipstick and mascara. One of them was evenly plump all over, the other plump in the abdomen. They drew back as he stomped his feet on the pavement and shook his arms, as if he was trying to fling the bad weather in their faces. He nodded at them, smiling. Assuming that he was headed for Big Lots, they made way for him to pass. They were nonplussed when he took out his pack of Winstons, found one that had not gotten soaked, and asked for a light. With what might have been a surly pout, which under all that makeup might have been a bright smile, one of the girls handed him a tiny red lighter.

"Is the shop open?" he asked after starting his cigarette and handing the lighter back. The storm reflected off the plate glass storefront. The interior of Moria's Notions looked dark.

"You have to go in over there," the evenly-plump girl said, folding one arm across and resting her other elbow on top of it, as though her cigarette was so heavy that additional support was necessary.

"You have to enter the sewing shop through Big Lots?"

"Oh...you want to come in here?" the evenly-plump girl said in bored astonishment, nodding at the door by which they were standing.

"Some people come in the wrong door, the middle-plump girl said quickly. She too had levered her forearm under her elbow. As Ari began to enter, she turned the end of her cigarette toward him, as though warding him off with its glowing tip. "You can't smoke in there."

"Ah," Ari nodded understandingly. "They're afraid the cloth will catch fire."

"You can't smoke in any stores," the evenly-plump girl said, looking at him with thickly applied suspicion. "We can't smoke inside either." As evidence, she nodded at the cigarette butts strewn thickly on the walkway.

"You work here?" Ari asked.

"Well yeah," both girls snorted defensively, as though he had questioned their ability to earn a living.

"You sell costumes, then?"

"Costumes?" The girls checked each other out, making sure their black rags were properly out of alignment. "These are our *clothes*."

"I beg your pardon. I'm new to this country."

"Well..." the evenly-plump girl tapped her foot with contingent forgiveness.

"Your English is good."

"I'm a translator at the UN."

"That's in New York," the middle-plump girl snapped, less forgiving, then cocked her head along with her cigarette. "What country?"

"Why France, of course." Ari assumed a prim stance.

The girls gave him a collective moony look.

"Je suis arrivé au summum de la Folie des 'Freedom Fries'. J'ai reçu des regards très particuliers, je dois le dire. En fait, certains de ces regards étaient identiques à celui que vous me jetez maintenant."

"Anyone can learn a language," the middle-plump girl said with all the disdain of someone who had never troubled to learn a second tongue.

"I'm visiting relatives during the U.N. Rosh Hashanah break," Ari continued. "My sister needs some...notions."

"Why didn't she come herself?" the evenly-plump girl asked.

"She broke her leg while skiing."

"At Wintergreen?"

"I'm not familiar with that resort. No, she was at Chamonix. Poor thing had to fly back to the States in a cast. Can you imagine being crammed, in a full leg cast, in a 767 with over three hundred passengers? She's still distraught."

"But she can still sit at a sewing machine?" the middle-plump girl shot.

Ari had overplayed his improvised persona. He took a shallow draw from his Winston, wanting to stretch out the smoking break, and repaired his bona fides. He gave a shrug that he hoped was Gallic enough without slipping into cliché.

"Not very well," Ari admitted. "But I wanted to help her out while I was in town."

She needs something called a bobbin."

"We've got plenty of those," the middle-plump girl rolled her eyes. The evenly-plump girl shrank with practical wariness. Was he going to insist on her helping him, forcing her to stub out her half-smoked cigarette?

"There's no rush," he assured them.

They could not relax entirely. His presence alone, interfering as it did with gossip and complaint, was enough to put them on guard. But they seemed to resign themselves to the intrusion.

"One of you wouldn't happen to be Tina, would you?"

"She's the owner," said the evenly-plump girl. The inference from her tone was that he should know better, that owners did not dress like this. Which seemed to Ari to conflict with their implication that they were dressed perfectly normally.

"You should turn on more lights," he suggested. "From the parking lot your store looks abandoned."

"Like that would help."

"Business isn't booming?"

"Business is busting," the middle-plump girl answered sourly. "See that across the road? That mall over there?"

"I'm afraid..."

"If it wasn't raining so hard, you'd see Hancock's Fabrics. People only come over here when Hancock's doesn't have something they want. And since Hancock has everything..."

"Has Tina ever thought of expanding?" Ari inquired, glancing over at the lawyer's

office, as though that would be the perfect place to start. "Or of moving to another location?"

The middle-plump girl took out a dainty handkerchief and dabbed at her nose. "Don't even try to mention it to her. We tried, and she almost took our heads off."

"Not that, surely," said Ari.

"She thinks this is the best location in the county."

"Yeah," the middle-plump girl joined in. "That's why Hancock's is here."

"You know--" The evenly-plump girl stopped.

Both girls fell into a prudent silence that was unnecessary, unless they had toed a dangerous line.

The middle-plump girl honked into a handkerchief identical to the one held by her coworker.

"If I had a cold I would cut back on my smoking."

Ari's helpful suggestion was greeted with a howl of silence.

"Do you think Tina would mind talking to me?" Ari asked.

The girls registered mild alarm.

"About that?" the middle-plump girl said.

"My sister moved into the house of the previous owner."

"Moria's house?" The girls froze for a moment, then drew towards him. He was suddenly a very interesting fellow.

"They were partners," said the evenly-plump girl. "They only named it Moria's Notions because--"

The middle-plump girl shot her a warning look.

"Well," she continued, "It sounded better than Tina's Tinkles."

Both girls laughed. For a moment, their inherent meanness dropped away.

"They were drunk when they came up with that one," the middle-plump girl explained.

"If you bring up the Rigginses with Tina..." the other one began.

"She took their deaths hard?"

"More than you can know."

The middle-plump girl tossed a dismissive hand in front of Ari. "And she doesn't like Frogs. I heard her say that once."

'Frogs'. Right to his face. Ari took offence--and he wasn't even a Frog. He smiled.

"So Moria Riggins drank a lot?"

"No more than anyone else," the evenly-plump girl shrugged.

Ari refrained from pointing out that there were hundreds of millions of people in the world who didn't drink at all. They would no doubt interpret the observation as a criticism. America, Land of the Lushes.

"Moria and Tina used to go bar-hopping during happy hour. Sometimes they took us along after we closed up shop."

"Yes?"

"Well, you know. 'Happy hour'. They got happy."

The evenly-plump girl made it sound as if the rest of the day was reserved for sheer misery.

"They did this often?" Ari asked.

"Not really. A couple times a week."

"Moria's children were being watched by a nanny?"

The girls found this word amusing. The proposition itself was subjected to a barrage of ridicule.

"That was Jerry's job. His studio was at home, so he became babysitter."

"While the mother was out..." Ari found the idea ludicrous and repulsive. "And this continued up to the time of Moria's death?"

The girls had gone into gossip mode and did not question Ari's inquisitiveness. There was a less-than-endearing lack of respect for their employers' privacy--and for the dead.

"Like clockwork."

"There were specific days when Moria and Tina went out together?"

"Tuesdays and Fridays."

The evenly-plump girl finished her cigarette and crushed it under her toe. She glanced toward the window, as though concerned that Tina might see them talking to Ari.

"Were there any specific bars that they went to?"

"No place special. Andy's, The Shamrock...they pretty much stuck to them."

She stopped at a nudge from the evenly-plump girl, who had apparently decided Ari was a bit too nosy for anyone's good.

Feigning indifference, Ari smiled, shrugged, and leaned towards the window.

"You really must turn on more lights. I was ready to pass by without stopping." He cupped his hands against window, blocking out the reflected parking lot. "Ah, but I see that you really are open..."

A tall, narrow woman was standing near the front counter. Her head was nodding forward as she spoke into a cell phone. When she saw him, she stood straight, said a few more words into the phone, then snapped it shut. She stormed to the front.

"Hey!" the evenly-plump girl protested as Tina violently threw open the door and fetched her in the shoulder.

"You'll get a lot worse if you don't get back to work," Tina said with the harshness of a mother and the authority corporate magnate. She nodded at the middle-plump girl. "You, too."

"You can't talk to us like that!"

"What? I can't talk to you like your boss?"

"Like we're nothing."

"You want your pay, don't you?"

The girls both opened their mouths--and gulped down their comebacks. They were filing into the store, Tina holding the door open for them, but stopped when they heard her next words, directed at Ari:

"There's nothing I can help you with. If you don't like being stuck in the Riggins house, you can go back where you belong. I'm right, aren't I? You're the Cinnamon guy?"

Ari offered a confessional grimace.

"*You* moved into--" the evenly-plump girl gawked. "Not your sister?"

"I knew it." The middle-plump girl's scowl was made positively menacing by her eye-shadow. "I bet you're not French, either."

"French!" The sound Tina made came out like jagged glass. "He told you that?"

He's totally Italian!"

This was just as problematically Eurocentric, as far as the girls were concerned. They were balefully reconfiguring his identity when Tina pointed inside. As they slumped away, Ari smiled at the middle-plump girl.

"My apologies, and my congratulations."

As the middle-plump girl turned, Tina let go of the door, letting it close.

"She's not pregnant, Mr. Cinnamon," Tina said sharply.

"Ciminon," Ari absently corrected her. Unaccustomed to embarrassment, he shrugged contritely at the bared teeth bordered by black lips on the other side of the glass.

"What kind of nonsense have you been telling them?" Tina demanded.

She was a half inch shorter than Ari. Her cropped red hair seemed to flame out behind her head, giving her the appearance of a trapeze artist who had just finished her act. She was dressed in a blouse and slacks.

"Forgive me. You can imagine that I would be curious about the Riggins family."

"Then why didn't you just come in and ask?"

"A cultural fault, I'm afraid. In Sicily we never approach a sensitive subject directly. It could get us killed. I'm sorry I misled your employees."

He was banking on American misconceptions and ignorance. And American cinema. Tina produced a slight but satisfactory flutter of uncertainty as she was racked by episodes of the Sopranos.

Ari was in a rush. He did not want to meet Carrington under these circumstances, and everything Tina had said indicated the detective was the one she'd been talking to on the phone. Chances were he was roaring up Broad at that very moment. With plenty to

mull over for the next few days, there was no need to accept unfavorable terrain. He doffed a non-existent fedora.

"Je vous demande pardon, Madame. J'ai un engagement antérieur, je dois y assister."

He did not relish the startled expression Tina wore as he forged once again into the deluge. He had probably made trouble for himself in that direction, and had little doubt it would not be long in coming. But he hadn't foreseen that Moria's Notions would be such a sore point with Carrington, with such abundant cause. If he had had any preconceptions, they had to do with the Riggins' standing in the community. He had already learned that Jerry and Moria were not only upstanding citizens, but outstanding upstanding citizens. They had won accolades for their work with the disadvantaged, the disabled and the disinherited. Not very long ago, there had been some protests lodged in the local paper's Letters to the Editor when Moria did not win Mother of the Year.

That she had *not* won was no surprise to Ari, now that he knew about her after-hours activities *vis* the bar scene. To his way of thinking, she was totally unfit. Being a mother, she should not even have held a job, let alone run a business.

But at least this confirmed his second preconception: between their two occupations, painting smudges and selling needles and thread, the combined income of the Riggins household should have been barely enough to rent a mid-sized flat. Unless one of them had come into a sizable inheritance, the house on the river was inconceivable.

Still unfamiliar with the local roads and highways, Ari avoided high speed and

quick, unexpected exits by taking Broad Street back to the city, keeping one eye peeled for an alternative source of groceries. He would have given his eyeteeth for a good, basic *guss*. Over the last few days the only food he had enjoyed had been Jack Daniels and Fritos, neither of which could be considered part of a normal diet. His roasted chicken had been spongy, his vegetables lacking in variety and the canned food was as monotonous as the tin it came in. The paneer cubes had been eaten and the chaats were unfulfilling snacks on a par with Fritos. The roti turned out to be his most meaningless purchase, there being nothing to eat it with; the curry he had attempted to make had failed miserably. Ari was not accustomed to cooking for himself, so it was reasonable to suspect this was due to his lack of culinary talent. After all, chick peas were about as basic as you could get. Yet the result of his labor had been half soft, half hard, and totally inedible.

At the intersection of Three Chopt Road he spotted an ethnic food market. He pulled into the parking lot and realized immediately that he had made a mistake when he stopped to let a Chinese family hurry past. But as he circled around to return to the exit, he braked again when an Indian woman rushed by, her Salwar kameez and dupatta flowing magically in defiance of the rain. He pulled into a space and trotted inside.

The clientele was eclectic enough to raise Ari's expectations. The store itself was much larger than the Indian grocer he had visited. But after he took up a hand basket and strode down the first aisle his heart sank. While the fruits and vegetables looked fresh, he was overwhelmed by the very variety he had been seeking. Bok choy, tat soi, purple kohlrabi, foot-long beans called dau gok...he had never heard of any of these, and even the ones that looked familiar bore unfamiliar names, and were probably cooked in

unfamiliar ways.

To his left the shelves were stocked with small glass jars. If Jerry Riggins' smudges had been packaged, they would have looked like these Chinese condiments. As he ventured further down the row, two women in jilbabs stopped and eyed him warily. Finally, a reaction he was accustomed to. As he passed them they drew their hands under their chins, as though guarding themselves against a sudden chill. Their dread was a little disconcerting, but there was no way they could have known him, except as a type. And, as a type, they had picked him out instantly from the crowd. Was there anything he could do about that?

Stay away from Arabs, was his sad but inescapable conclusion.

At the rear of the store was a long glass display. Inside, packed in ice, were fish both local and from well beyond the horizon. In front of the display was a line of crates and barrels that had been pried open to reveal fresh herring, red snappers, rockfish, and a gooey mass of squid, their gray tentacles compacted, eyes gaping forlornly. Against the rear wall was a fish tank filled with their still-living relatives drifting obliviously in dreamy innocence.

Behind the refrigerated display cases men in white paper caps and bib aprons wielded filleting knives with sweeping strokes. Fish blood and entrails were piled in reassuring heaps, pleasing reminders of where food really came from. It took Ari a moment to gain the attention of one of the workers.

"Excuse me..."

The man pushed a codfish to the side and began working on another. He offered a brief upward glance, then swooped with his blade from the gills to the vent. He

scooped out the fish guts with fingers encased in clear polyethylene. He looked up. There were customers of all shades and hues calling out. The man frowned, as though trying to figure out which voice belonged to Ari. He looked down again, because he was again making broad swipes with his knife and had to take care not to dissect his hand.

"Which one of these would make a good masgouf?"

The man stared up at him for a moment. "*Deng yīxià, deng yīxià,*" he said, then turned and spoke to one of his coworkers.

"No," Ari interrupted, counting his luck. His smattering of Mandarin was usually useless around Chinese workers, the majority of whom spoke Cantonese. "It won't be braised."

The fish processors froze when they realized Ari had understood them. The man Ari had first addressed tapped his hat with his bloody thumb. Then, very tentatively, he said, "*Cuìpí yú?*"

Ari nodded. "Yes, crispy skin."

A collective sigh both pensive and delighted arose from the workers and some of the customers--even among the non-Chinese. Their linguistic bubble had been burst by an outsider, giving pleasure and pain. Had they been trespassed against, or had an unexpected and welcome guest arrived at their doorstep?

The opinion of the man to whom Ari had been conversing was obvious. His grin was almost ecstatic. No, Ari amended. It *was* ecstatic.

"You say masgouf?" he said in English.

"Yes."

"I remember now. I know fish. You want cop."

"Cop? Yes...carp! But I don't see any here..."

"We have in back! You eat plenty?"

"Not plenty. Only for me."

The man tried to size Ari up through the mist-filled display. "You eat plenty. You wait!"

Ari hoped the wait would not be long. Some of the people around him looked as if they wanted to strike up a conversation, and not in English. He had not realized his smidge of Mandarin would draw so much friendly attention. But from the end of one aisle, half-hidden by a freestanding rack of tea, the two Arab women Ari had encountered while inspecting the vegetables watched him uncertainly. They would be telling their husbands about him, tacking on their suspicions like holy writ, and their small community would soon be buzzing.

It was not a good morning. What he had intended to be a discrete foray in search of information was becoming a spectacle.

Ari's personal fishmonger emerged from the back room holding a fish swaddled in white paper. He rested it on his work counter and pressed back the wrapping. With a wide grin he looked up at Ari, watching from the other side of the counter.

"*Zhēn měi*," said Ari.

"Yes, beautiful!" the man laughed. But as he raised his knife a squabble broke out among his coworkers, who gathered around like surgeons disputing a risky procedure. Ari had suddenly acquired his own groupies. They were determined their idol's every whimsy should be catered to, and this meant treating the carp with the utmost respect and delicacy. Ari found the rapid-fire debate impossible to follow.

Ari's fishmonger threw up both hands, nearly slicing off the nose of the man standing next to him.

"The man wants masgouf! I know fish! Masgouf should be whole fish!"

The others backed off at this sign of ethnic food expertise. They looked at Ari almost apologetically, as though they had unintentionally violated a Commandment and were begging forgiveness. Ari's fishmonger dismissed their ignorance with a brisk shake of his upper body and proceeded to scale and gut the carp. Ari wanted to urge him to speed it up, but the man had abandoned his usual deftness for a slow, methodical approach. He wanted his prized customer to see what care he was taking on his behalf. When done, he tilted the carp Ari's way so that he could admire his artistry.

"Hǎo jí le."

Ari's fishmonger carefully wrapped up the carp, then slipped through a gap between the displays to place the treasure in Ari's outstretched arms.

"You cook soon? Best fresh. No freeze."

"Fresh is best, always."

"You cook on wood. Use barbecue."

"I understand," said Ari, thinking of the woodless Jenn-Air in his kitchen. It would do almost as well, but he was not about to say this to his fishmonger, who looked ready to grab him by the lapels if Ari contradicted him.

"You can cut along back, make it flat, but best keep whole. You can put it..."

The man paused.

"Rotisserie!" a coworker shouted.

"I know fish!" Ari's fishmonger shot back.

"But you don't know rotisseries!"

"No rotisserie! Grill!"

"I understand perfectly," Ari said, a little nervously.

"You can stuff it, too. And serve with rice!"

Ari answered with a nod as he tested the weight. Enough here for five people. His fishmonger must have sized him up as a very hungry man, indeed. Then his mind took a downturn.

Should I tell him how expensive this has become in my homeland? And how much more expensive, and dubious, it has gotten since a fatwa was pronounced against it?

The carp was a freshwater fish, and there had been so many corpses tossed in the river that the religious authorities were not only concerned for the health of their flock, but by the possibility of indirect cannibalism.

Satisfied that his instructions had been understood, Ari's fishmonger signaled his approval with a flurry of clapping. The other fish processors clumped behind the displays, their white-capped heads looking severed but pleased as they beamed ray-gun grins his way. Ari submitted to an irresistible urge to bow his head.

Wanting to avoid the two Arab women and their baleful looks, he carried his package to the last broad aisle, turned the corner, and nearly fell over them.

They were as startled as Ari and jumped back a little. He gave a small nod and was about to pass around them when one woman murmured, "*Al-salamu 'alaykum.*"

"Wa 'alaykum as-salam."

"You must try the Middle Eastern Bakery and Grocery."

Ari stopped and looked down at her.

"No," the other woman said. "Ali's, in the Fan."

"The Fan?" Ari asked.

"In the city. Ask anyone here. They can tell you where it is."

The first woman was shaking her head. "Middle Eastern has more to choose from."

"But Ali's is Halal."

"So is..." The first woman paused. "Crescent Groceries is Halal..."

"What about the Mediterranean Bakery at Regency...?"

As the women set to bickering over which shop was better, Ari wondered how he could extract himself from their clutches. Having been raised in a culture where women could be simply brushed aside, it would be no great offense to turn his back on these two. Yet treating women with contempt had never suited Ari's taste. There was no question that most of them were an inferior species, but neither were they donkeys. He could be brusque with them when the occasion demanded, but he had a much greater tolerance for female inanity than most men he knew.

Two things resigned him to hearing them out. It was obvious they knew where good food was to be had. Judging from the bundles they were hugging to their breasts, they had only come to the Chinese market for the fresh fish. They did their main grocery shopping in the Middle Eastern shops Ari had so far failed to locate.

The second reason for his forbearance was the way they used 'ani' instead of 'ana'. The dialect was Baghdad Arabic. He had to be careful. He had already drawn too much attention to himself, and it was not yet noon. He allowed his posture to relax into a passive stance and sighed. His eyes wandered to the front of the store. A young man was

staring up at some gaudy Chinese statuary on the shelves overhead, but Ari doubted he could be much interested in the brightly colored demons and dragons of the Orient. His left arm was pressed against his side, as though he was favoring something heavy under his camouflage jacket. He kept lowering his head and looking in the direction of the checkout line, then shifting his gaze from the top of the aisles to the broad window at the front. There were at least two others. Damn...did they think this was a branch of Al-Rajhi Bank?

He surveyed the wall against the ceiling. Security cameras. Tons of them, at least one every fifteen feet. They had to be dummies set up to deter honest citizens. The dishonest ones would not be impressed. The desperate ones would not be deterred.

"*Alma'derah.*" Ari reached behind the two women. In what in the West would be considered exaggerated deference, they scooted several feet out of his way as he plucked some chopsticks off the shelf. "These might be useful."

They gave him puzzled look. Perhaps they had made the wrong assumption about him. Good, Ari thought. Let them be confused. But he knew they would not stay confused for long.

"You mustn't converse with strange men," Ari admonished, taking little satisfaction in their sudden wide-eyed horror. He only wanted them to retreat in embarrassment to the back of the store. He succeeded admirably.

Good. They were out of harm's way.

He walked slowly past some large cardboard boxes filled with canned goods in the middle of the aisle. Cradling his catch of the day in one arm, Ari used it to shield his free hand as he nimbly stripped the paper wrapping from the chopsticks. He stopped

briefly when he reached the far wall and scanned the shelves. Miscellaneous foodstuffs gave way to statuary about midway up the aisle. He worked his way forward, nodding introspectively, a prudent shopper.

He paused again and glanced up at a dragon baring prominent teeth and a large forked tongue. It was both menacing and pitiful, as though it was being smothered beneath its protective sheet of semi-transparent plastic.

Turning, he found he now had a clear view of the checkout line and the main entrance. Next to the automatic doors stood another young man, not more than seventeen, perusing notices tacked on a bulletin board, as though he could read Mandarin or Cantonese or Xiang or Wu or any other Chinese dialect. He too was wearing a camouflage jacket, as was the young man waiting in line, scrutinizing the inscrutable titles of the DVD's piled in a wire basket near the counter. It was as if the store was being invaded by a commando unit, which was probably how the young men thought of the operation.

A small man was sidling along the vegetable display, his face gone to stone. Ari guessed it was the store manager or owner. He too had seen the impending predicament. He was trying to reach the front, which meant he did not carry a remote panic button in his pocket. The alarm must be in his office, on the underside of his desk. If he made a sudden dash the young men would be alerted and hell would break loose prematurely. Ari made a broad gesture, as though working out a cramp. It caught the manager's attention. Ari shook his head slightly. The manager stopped and held his breath.

The novice commandos were waiting for a signal, which would probably come when the man in line came to his turn. There was no need for this, except it gave them

time to work up their nerve. If the man in line did not act, they could leave with no more harm done than to their shared ego. But Ari was not a great believer in waiting. One thing about the inevitable: it usually happened.

He slid one of the chopsticks into his jacket pocket and pressed the hand holding the other under the carp, the blunt end of the stick braced by his thumb. He glanced again at the manager, who still seemed to be holding his breath. Ari hoped he would not pass out from lack of oxygen--and that he would have sense enough to shout a warning when the time came. The front of the building was packed with customers.

Ari kept the manager in place with another shake of his head. He moved a little closer to the young man staring blankly at the ceramic demons overhead.

"They wouldn't go with my décor."

The young man gave a little jump. He was so focused on remaining unobtrusive that he hadn't noticed Ari's approach. A true third-rater. Ari almost pitied him.

"Huh?"

"Thesh wicked Chinese monthsters," Ari said with a lisp. "My color schtheme ith much more thubdued."

The young man looked quickly toward the checkout line. Ari noted a chest-high pile of bagged Jasmine rice a few feet away. The robber probably intended to use it for cover. Idiot. Then Ari thought again. That bottom row of bags would make an excellent firing step.

The young man gave another little jump as Ari edged closer.

"Hey!"

With a little luck this can be nipped in the bud, no shots fired.

A snippet of sloppy thinking that Ari quickly dismissed. You didn't go into something like this using half-measures. A pre-emptive strike was all or nothing. If you forgot that, if you tried to pull back after committing yourself, you got your ass shot off. Great nations had fallen under the weight of second thoughts.

"My apartment would thimply drown under all thith gold and red. It's very cloth. Would you like to sthee it?"

"Gawd-damn, I heard all you people were fucking faggots," the young man complained, wanting to move away but forced to maintain his position. He threw a desperate glance at the checkout line.

What if that isn't a gun under his jacket? What if he's only trying to skip out with a few of those ludicrous giant bean pods in order to feed his ailing mother?

"Us people?" Ari inquired politely.

"You fucking Arabs. Everyone knows you take it up the ass. Get the fuck away from me! Get on, now. Get! I don't want to have to bust you."

Even if that is a gun bulge, what if the man in line chickens out? Let them slither away the wiser--the wisdom of inaction.

Out the side of his eye Ari saw the man in line move up to the second register. The man next to the door left off reading the incomprehensible bulletins and approached the first register. Ari hoped the manager had regained his breath. He didn't look. Instead, he balanced himself. Balance was everything. But what he did next went against his training. He warned his adversary.

"My young friend..."

"I said get the fuck away from me," the young man said, looking towards the

front, licking lips that had gone horribly dry.

"If that is a gun you are carrying, and you try to use it here and now, I will kill you."

The young man froze, then slowly swiveled his head in Ari's direction. Seeing no weapon in Ari's hand, but only a plain white package that in no way resembled a gun, he grimaced with determination.

"Yeah?"

There was a shout up front. The young man reached under his jacket.

"Okay you motherfuckers!" someone yelled. "Open it up! *Now!*"

Ari found it convenient to let the young man draw his gun before dropping his fish and ramming the chopstick in his throat. He intentionally missed the carotid.

The young man screeched hoarsely and began to fall, but did not let go of his gun.

TEC-DC9, semi-automatic. Popular with criminals and high school mass-murderers. Better known as TEC-9, when it was fully automatic. Has this one been converted? Safety's off. Thirty-six round magazine.

Ari grabbed the gun hand and snapped back the young man's fingers, crack-crack-crack so quick it was like a single stalk breaking. He caught the gun as it fell, kneeled on the bottom row of rice bags, took aim.

Fluidity of movement. Knit every move into a seamless whole. Never stop.

The store manager was yelling in what seemed to be several languages, all readily understood. Everyone dropped to the floor.

Hearing the yells of his companion, the man at the second register began to look up. A lotus flower blossomed in his forehead and he tumbled backward across the first

register conveyor.

Ari tracked his next target. The man would have been dead already except the first young man had clutched at him and Ari had been forced to twist sideways and rap his knuckles against his forehead.

The store manager did not heed his own advice. He jumped in front of the third robber, who slammed him to the ground with his fist, then took aim. It was a pitifully stupid move. Ari was the one who had shot his partner. Perhaps he had not seen him behind the rice bags and thought it was the manager firing at them.

Ari squeezed off a round. The bullet entered below the third man's ear. His jaw lurched away from his face as he dropped on a large crate of Korean pears.

"Motherfucker!" the first man cried as he groped at the chopstick in his neck with his undamaged hand. "Motherfucker!"

Ari aimed the TEC-9 at his forehead. "I let you go once. If you use that filthy word one more time, I will kill you."

Except for his gasps of pain, the young man fell silent.

"Good."

Lowering the handgun, Ari held it barrel down at his side as he strode over to the checkout line. His first victim was still on the conveyor, which kept tugging at his arm, as though the dead man was still insisting on being checked out. A line of blood was splattered on the first register. Paid in full.

The head of his second victim was hidden by large Korean pears, their natural redishness enhanced by the messy headshot.

Only now did some of the customers begin to cry in subdued terror. The gunfight

had not lasted long enough to work up a full head of horror.

One of the checkout girls was helping the manager to his feet. His wan smile was interrupted by a wince. He touched the side of his face. Then his eye fell on the pear crate.

"Ah..." He looked away. "So young."

"Yes," said Ari. "You're all right?"

The manager nodded, gulping. "Thank you--"

"You'll need an ambulance for the one behind the rice bags."

He nodded at all the chirping cell phones being opened by staff and customers.

"Come soon."

"You did very well," Ari said. The manager nodded and tried to smile.

"Scared."

"I have to go." Ari tucked the gun under his jacket.

The manager's eyes widened in comprehension. "Police...?"

"I'd rather not."

"Yes, yes...police get all mixed up."

Ari smiled. "It's the same everywhere."

"Go!" The manager waved him toward the exit. "Thank you! Go! We take care no police!"

"Thank you," Ari said and walked out without looking back.

The rain had let up. He was halfway to his car when his fishmonger rushed out after him with the fresh carp.

"Here! You forgot!"

Ari took the package and again caught himself bowing his head. "Thank you."

"Thank you!" the man clapped. As Ari got into the Scion, the fishmonger cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Don't forget, serve with rice!"

TEN

Ghaith remained still. But the first prisoner, having recently seen so many beheadings played out on Al Jazeera, had a vivid image of what was happening behind him. He moved.

"God is great!" the guard cried out. The blade flashed in the truck light.

The prisoner dropped sideways, too late and too little. The scimitar caught him under the ear, shattered and separated the jaw, shuddered between the eyes, and jammed in the brain, parting the hemispheres into quarters before the guard lost hold and the prisoner fell into a howling, squirming lump. The guard swore and reached down.

For an instant, Omar was frozen in place by the grisly sight. The policeman was distracted by the gurgled cries, which should not be coming from a head separated from its body, and glanced away to see what had gone wrong.

There was a loud snap as Ghaith's knuckles caught the policeman under the ear, cracking his jaw. He staggered, losing his grip on the M-16, which Ghaith yanked out of his hands and, in the same fluid movement, rammed the stock into Omar's face.

It took the men guarding the prisoner a fatal moment to realize what was happening. In a flash, Ghaith judged which one was reacting faster and fired a burst. The guard's kuffiah whiffled like a shredded melon and he fell backward. The second guard was aiming his Kalashnikov when the next burst caught him in the chest. He didn't fall, but the muzzle of the rifle drooped down, like a branch giving in the wind. That wasn't enough for Ghaith, who sent the man to the ground with another burst.

Briefly ignoring the man with the scimitar, Ghaith shot the policeman as he tried

to role away. Omar was sitting up. Ghaith kicked him back to the ground, then pointed his gun at the last guard.

After some effort, he had freed the scimitar from the head of the prisoner. Perhaps he had delayed unslinging his own rifle on the assumption his companions could deal with Ghaith. Now, his eyes hidden in the shadow of his kuffiah, he finally looked up to find his assumption ill-founded.

"An army of one," Ghaith said.

If he dropped the scimitar and reached for his rifle he would be dead. If he turned and ran he would be dead. Best, then, to go out in a blaze of glory. Raising the sword, he charged.

"God is great!"

A neat line of holes appeared across his chest and he fell forward with the suddenness of a snapped cable, the scimitar flying several feet beyond his outstretched hands.

"A clerk!" Omar was screeching as he struggled up. "A clerk!"

There was no time for farewells, and he didn't think much of his boyhood friend, in any event.

"Give my regards to the virgins," he said.

As he pressed the trigger, Ghaith was struck by the thought that both he and Omar were digesting bites from the same ball of lu'mat al-adi. Only half of the pastry would complete its intended biological passage.

Ghaith walked over to the guard he had shot in the chest. Still alive, with blood-frosted air bubbles popping out of his exposed lungs. Whipping off the scarf, Ghaith

immediately recognized the young man.

"Why, Mohamed, what are you doing running with this crowd? You're a pederast, not a Mujahid. Or have they become the same thing?"

The young man could not answer. Ghaith shot him between the eyes, shattering his thick spectacles.

The two remaining prisoners had prudently fallen on their sides when they heard the gunfire. They remained still, ignorant of what was happening. Ghaith went over to the one at the end of the row, leaned over, and removed the hood. He stared into the frightened face for a moment, grunted, then stood and went over to the middle prisoner. He slipped off the hood and frowned.

"I don't know you."

"I..." the man gasped, choked by terror.

"It doesn't matter." Ghaith stepped over to the first prisoner and found him still alive. The sword stroke had nearly sliced his head in half. Seeing no hope, he aimed the rifle at the man's head.

"No!" the prisoner at the opposite end of the row cried out.

"God be with you, Aziz Shahrستاني," Ghaith said, and fired.

Four hours later, when both the rain and the police reappeared at Beach Court, Ari thought the store manager had betrayed him, either through fear of the authorities or some other, unknown motive. The downpour was a footnote penalty invoked by the gods.

He was standing in the garage door, trying to create a draft to let smoke out of the

house, when the cruiser pulled up to the curb. As soon as the doors swung open, Ari signaled to them to bring their car up the driveway to avoid getting wet.

"Appreciate that," the officer on the passenger side said after lowering his window. He sniffed. "Something burning?"

Ari immediately recognized him and the driver as the two who had deposited a small wreath against the mailbox post on his first day in the Riggins house. They were younger than his own forty years, but they weren't kids. Early to mid-thirties.

Howie Nottoway had told him these were the first men on the scene after the Riggins massacre.

"I had a mishap with my stove," Ari explained with an inward wince. The Chinese fishmonger might have put the fear of chefs everywhere in him, but he had had no choice but to use the Jenn-Air if he wanted his carp fresh. Even if he had owned a barbecue, cooking outside in this weather would have been impracticable. Everything seemed to go swimmingly after Ari pre-heated the grill element of the Jenn-Air and laid out his hard-won catch. Then the kitchen began to fill with smoke. Some of it was sucked down the stove's central vent, but not nearly enough to keep pace with the growing cloud. Only by opening every downstairs door and window, and ultimately the garage doors, could he clear away the air of smoke and fish smell.

In the end, though, he had met with reasonable success. He unfolded the aluminum foil and pinched off a bite. Not the best he'd ever had, but his taste buds howled with delight. He had been intending to close all the doors and windows (ignoring any puddles that might have collected indoors) and brave the rain, taking the fish out to the gazebo. The best place to eat masgouf was at the riverside, no matter what the

weather.

Now it appeared the carp would grow cold before he got beyond that lone nibble. But this was an opportunity too good to miss. He had planned for it, in fact, when he told Fred to remove the wreath from the base of the mailbox. Its replacement was on the back seat of the prowler car, next to a pair of dark serge caps in vinyl rain protectors.

"Please..." Ari made a gesture of welcome, encouraging the two men to get out of the car. They appeared reluctant.

"Actually, Mr. Ciminon, we just wanted a quick word." The officer on the passenger side attempted a courteous smile. The result was like the sharp edge of a newly opened can.

"Thank you."

The officer gave him a quizzical look.

"For pronouncing my name correctly. Your Detective Carrington seems to have...difficulty with it."

"He's not *my* detective," the driver grouched. His hands had remained on the steering wheel. In fact, the engine was still running, forcing them all to raise their voices to be heard.

"Please..." Ari entreated. "I find it awkward to be speaking down to you like this. You must find it difficult, in that position..."

The inference--that they were humbling themselves by remaining seated in the car--hit just the right note. The driver switched off the engine and they got out.

"Nice box," said the one nearest Ari, grinning at the Scion, which looked punier than ever next to the souped-up cruiser.

"It gets me to the ABC store and back," Ari shrugged.

The officer who had commented on the xB chuckled. The driver, on the other hand, summoned up a deep scowl. Opposite personalities. Could Ari use this to his advantage? Or would it make his task more difficult?

"Officer..." Ari leaned forward slightly, as though using the gravity of his body to draw out the policeman's name. Both officers were wearing rain slickers, their badge numbers and identity tags hidden underneath.

"Mangioni," said the policeman standing closest to Ari. His dark hair was just long enough to have been disheveled when he removed his hat and tossed it in the back seat. He offered up another thin smile. Friendliness seemed to be a painful duty for him, but at least he was trying.

"A fellow countryman?" Ari inquired.

"Three generations removed," Mangioni answered dubiously, his eyes flicking off Ari's face, or more accurately Ari's complexion. Yes. Several generations and a million North African immigrants ago. Mangioni gave a little laugh. "My people never considered Sicily part of Italy."

Ari nodded in amusement. "And my people returned the sentiment."

"Jackson," the other policeman barked from the other side of the cruiser, apparently annoyed by the foreign convocation.

"A very American name," Ari nodded sagely.

"Hamburgers, pizza, French fries and doughnuts," Mangioni said, describing his partner by the food he ate--all of foreign origin and suitably altered to American tastes.

"We just were wondering..." Jackson verbally nudged Mangioni, who nodded and

dropped the painful smile.

"Mr. Ciminon, about those flowers on the curb...do they bother you?"

Even with the engine off, Mangioni had to raise his voice against the din of rain on the driveway a few feet away. His words were transformed into hollow echoes on the bare walls of the garage.

"Not at all," Ari said. "I was surprised my groundskeeper removed them. They're intended as a memorial to the family that lived here before me?"

"Yes."

"You knew them well?"

"Not very well..."

"We didn't know them jack squat," Jackson said more succinctly, fumbling at the radio on his collar. The rain slicker made it difficult.

"Then this is the policy of your local government? I mean, to place these memorials...?"

"It's not standard departmental procedure," Mangioni said.

"Then someone asked you to..." Ari gingerly prodded. "Or ordered you--"

"Ha!" Jackson's exclamation rang out like a shot. He had unclipped his radio and was holding it to his ear.

"We got the shooter?" Mangioni asked his partner.

"Hell no. Bob says Big C is walking around offering a reward to anyone who admits offing three lowlives."

Three dead? Ari doubted the manager or clientele had, in a fit of civic rage, finished off the last robber. He was sure the chopstick in the young man's throat wasn't

fatal. Most likely, in his haste, Ari had rapped him too hard on the side of the head with his knuckles.

"Any luck?" Mangioni asked.

Jackson shook his head and re-clipped his radio. "A million witnesses, and no one saw nothing. No security video, either."

Dummy cameras, just as Ari had guessed--or rather, hoped. And the manager was keeping his word. A good thing, too. Police were always getting 'mixed up'. It came with the job. And the inclination.

"Just our luck," Mangioni said. "Three stiffs and Big C gets a dose of hero worship."

Jackson let his facial expression speak for itself. Was he disgusted with the three corpses, or Big C? Could Big C be Carrington?

"The flowers..."

Mangioni cocked a brow at his partner. "We do it as a favor."

Jackson circled to the front of the prowl car and stared at the Scion as though it was a physical manifestation of Mangioni's answer.

"This person must have had a very high opinion of the Riggins family," said Ari.

"Big C is goofy on them."

Mangioni's eyelids performed the equivalent of a stutter. "Jackson means yes," he said, as though Ari obviously needed help translating this difficult passage. "He spent a lot of his free hours with them, not that he had many of those."

"Works hard?"

"Carrington? Like a dog."

Big C. Carrington. Ari nodded and smiled. "Commendable."

"My ass," said Jackson.

"For Christ's sake--"

"Big C hung out around here because of the Massington fortune," Jackson said, reaching under his slicker. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and pointed it at Ari. "You don't mind, do you? You already got plenty of smoke around here."

"Not at all," said Ari, taking out his Winstons--and smiling through his deflation. His primary theory had just gone up...well, in smoke. Massington must be Moria Riggins' maiden name. Ari did not think her inheritance had been enormous. This house was very nice, but millions would have bought better.

Mangioni squinched his nose at his partner. "Aren't you due for a physical soon?"

"Already had it. A little bloody phlegm. No cause for alarm." As Jackson lit up, he gave Ari a grin that wasn't really all that pleasant, though Ari sensed it was well-intentioned. He lit up one of his own and their smoke mingled. The unity of addiction. "We can't even smoke in the car."

"Thank God," Mangioni said fervently.

"All those hours sitting around, and no smoking? Can you fucking believe that?"

Ari considered a comment on the fantasy of American freedom, then decided that would be the wrong toe to step on--especially when the one doing the stepping was a foreigner. He shrugged noncommittally.

"Would you like to come inside?" he asked.

"Actually..." Mangioni began. "Now we know you don't mind the flowers--"

"You're curious about what happened."

Jackson's bald observation clipped away much of the sham Ari had intended to employ. "Yes. Very much so. You understand..."

"I understand you're a ghoul, like the rest of us. Don't go mealy, partner," Jackson responded to Mangioni's pained expression. "Ninety-percent of the force gets off on 'the dark side'. Let's go in. Mr. Ciminon wants the modus operandi. And don't quote chapter and verse to me. Mr. Ciminon isn't going to run to the newsies with any new details we might give him. He doesn't strike me as wanting too much attention. Am I right?"

Ari nodded emphatically.

Mangioni's only protest was a reduction of his already-thin smile. He was the public relations half of the team, the beaming face of the Force. Once the need for a cheerful front was eliminated, the wind went out of him. He doffed his slicker and began folding it neatly.

"Good idea," said Jackson, removing his own rain gear and tossing it on the hood of the cruiser.

As Ari led them inside, he asked about the Neighborhood Watch signs he had seen in the area, including the one at the turn-off to Beach Court.

"Made up of concerned citizens," Mangioni explained. "They take turns patrolling the area and call us in if they spot anything suspicious. They're volunteers, and unarmed."

"The concept has been recently introduced in my country," Ari said with a small smile. "Were there any calls from the Neighborhood Watch on the night of the killings?"

"No."

"It's mostly put-up," Jackson snorted. "For show. Hardly anyone wants to get off

their lazy ass that late at night."

Ari paused at the open door leading inside and made a small gesture, palm down. Jackson strode inside. Mangioni hesitated, then followed him through the small corridor leading to the kitchen. Jackson looked neither right nor left, but Ari thought Mangioni threw a glance at the back door. For the moment, though, Ari wanted to pursue the current topic.

"You have a cat?" Jackson asked, noting the dishes decorated with paw prints on the kitchen floor.

"I hope so." Ari had completely forgotten about Sphinx when he opened the house up to clear the smoke. "I bought him at the pet shop, for company."

"You really don't have anyone else coming? No family? That's too bad. A cat is piss-poor company, you ask me," Jackson concluded with a sniff of disdain.

"I have a cat," Mangioni reminded him.

"Yeah. Sometimes I think you got furballs, too. Anyway, you've got a wife to scoop the poop for you."

"I wanted to keep him inside," Ari sighed. "To get him acclimated to his new home. But when I opened the door to let in fresh air...the last I saw, he was running for the woods."

"Too bad," said Mangioni solicitously.

"Consider yourself lucky if it drowns in the river," said Jackson. "But it'll be back before you know it. You've been feeding it. Once a cat knows where the food is, you have to shoot it to get rid of it."

"That's very reassuring," said Ari. He leaned down and pointed out the small

window above the sink. "I was wondering...is Howie Nottoway over there a member of the local Neighborhood Watch?"

Jackson glanced at Mangioni, who shrugged back at him. "Don't know. Could be."

"Wasn't it Nottoway who called in to complain about those fireworks on the island?"

"Oh yeah," Mangioni said slowly, but not reluctantly. "But that was a citizen complaint, not the Watch. I don't think...hell, it was almost two years ago."

"He never called back?" Ari asked. "About those fireworks?"

"I don't think so."

Either Howie had grown accustomed to the Whistling Jupiters, or had decided the police would do nothing about them. Just as pertinent, if Howie was a member of the Neighborhood Watch, and was patrolling the area the night he called, he could very well have been up and about when the killers entered the Riggins house.

"But you don't think it was Nottoway who made the anonymous call?"

"You mean that night?" Jackson said. "Who knows? That call was made to Crimestoppers. It's a special 800 number. No recording, no tracing." He grinned at Mangioni. "Sort of like confession."

"Hell no," Mangioni shot back. "The priest doesn't run off to the cops after hearing all the gory details."

"Presumably the caller knew he would remain unknown?"

"Everyone knows how Crimestoppers works," said Jackson.

"And if the killer himself called, identified himself, and described the crime he

had just committed...?"

"I don't think that's ever happened," Jackson said slowly.

"But if it did?"

"Then I think the priest would go running to the police," Mangioni volunteered.

"Right," his partner agreed. "But in this case no one from Crimestoppers told us anything about a phoned-in confession."

"I only offered it as a theoretical possibility," Ari shrugged apologetically.

"What was it you were burning?" Jackson sniffed, looking at the aluminum foil bundle in which he had wrapped his dinner. "Fish?"

"Carp," said Ari. "I'd be glad to share some with you."

Both policemen shook their heads.

"Too bony for me," said Jackson.

"Too fishy for me," said Mangioni.

And too much for me, thought Ari, who briefly considered keeping it warm in the oven before concluding that would dry it out. Better moist and cold than hot and dry.

"If you want to eat, we can skip the walk-through." Jackson said this in a manner fully confident that Ari would prefer going hungry. It smacked too much of expectation, of premeditation. Was this another favor, like the flowers? Had Carrington asked (or ordered) them to put a scare into him, for the purpose of getting him to move out?

"Walk-through," Ari said without hesitation.

"We were on Forest Hill when the call came," Jackson began. "There was trouble at The Crossroads a few nights ago. A shoot-out, actually. You wouldn't expect that

kind of thing at a cappuccino joint, but there it is. We made a few passes, keeping an eye out, but there wasn't much more than the usual caffeine freaks.

"So we weren't far away from here around midnight."

"What do you mean when you say 'the call'?"

"Not much. Just an address and a report of a loud disturbance."

"And when you arrived?"

"Not a peep. We put a spot on the house--"

"I'm sorry..." Ari smacked himself on the forehead as evidence of his stupidity.

"We shined a spotlight on the house," Jackson amended with exaggerated courtesy.

"It was dark, then? No lights on in the house?"

Jackson took the question with poor grace, giving Ari a testy look. "I didn't think you'd want so much detail."

"I'm sorry. I only--"

"You ask like a cop."

For an instant, Ari's ear mis-tuned the word as 'act'. But no, Jackson had said 'ask'. It came to the same thing.

"I have a curiosity for detail," Ari confessed.

"I don't remember what was on or off," said Jackson. "The yard was dark, that's all."

"The upstairs bedroom lights were on," Mangioni said quietly.

"You saw the boys' lights on?" Ari asked in a voice just as low. Jackson, standing in front of them, heard every word.

"Why the hell are you two whispering?"

Ari thought Mangioni was marking the solemnity of that fatal night and had followed suit. But the fierce exchange of glances between the two officers told him otherwise. Mangioni was alerting Jackson that, now that he had embarked on this walk-through, he'd better get his facts straight. Why the warning should be necessary at all piqued Ari's interest even further. In the space of a few minutes, the 'good cop, bad cop' roles had already been switched twice. Due, no doubt, to opposing agendas.

"I couldn't see the rear bedrooms at first," Mangioni elaborated, no longer half-whispering. "We circled around at the end of the street."

"The front..." Ari nodded.

"We only saw the other lights after we walked out back."

"So all right!" Jackson's outburst reminded Ari of Carrington, who was inclined to dominate conversations. "Anyway, there wasn't enough light to see much of anything. That's why we used the spots. All right?"

"Did you pull up the Riggins' phone number on your computer?" Ari asked Jackson.

"Eh?"

"Did you call them from your car? That would be the wise thing to do, if for no other reason than to alert anyone inside that two strangers would be arriving in the middle of the night."

"We're not strangers!" Jackson protested. "We're cops!"

Ari turned to Mangioni, who was staring blankly at the aluminum-wrapped fish on the counter. There were some details that he, too, apparently wanted to dodge. Ari

prepared himself for a highly selective evening.

"We called, all right?" Jackson said in a macho huff. "No one answered, all right? Now can we get on with this?" Jackson brushed past Ari, towards the front of the house.

"Where...?"

"To show you where the bodies were."

"Shouldn't a proper walk-through begin at the beginning?" Ari's smile overflowed with innocent inquiry.

Jackson stopped. "You want Adam and Eve?"

"Did you pull up in the driveway when you arrived?"

"Of course not. We parked on the street and got out."

"How was the weather?"

"The weather?" Jackson said in exasperation. "Cold as a witches tit."

"I mean, was it clear? Cloudy? Raining? Snowing?"

"No snow, clear skies."

"You went straight to the back door?"

"We knocked on the front door first."

"The front curtains were open?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you would have seen Mr. Riggins through the window as you came up the sidewalk?" Ari conjectured. "According to the chart in the newspaper the chair he was in was turned away from the window."

"No," said Mangioni, sighing. "It was facing the window. But it was dark. We didn't see him."

"Why would the papers--"

"An easy enough mistake. People would assume an easy chair faces inside."

"If it *was* a mistake," Jackson said, a little more subdued. "The city desk might've figured they'd get a few more readers if they had him facing the Christmas tree when he was shot. It's an American thing. Bottom line, though, we don't know how that chair got turned around in the diagram."

"You don't know who supplied them with the chart?"

"We don't mess with the newsies. That's up to the PR people, or the precinct commander, or the Chief. Sometimes a captain or lieutenant something or other gets into the act. Carrington--he's handling the investigation--is a Detective Sergeant." Jackson's eyes narrowed. "It's not a plant, Mr. Ciminon."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning no one doctored the evidence. The official report shows the chair the right way."

"I never thought otherwise." Ari cleared his throat. "So you knocked at the front door. I presume no one answered."

"So we go around back."

"When you saw the lights on in the boys' bedrooms."

"Uh...yeah...I guess. That's when we saw the door, all busted to hell."

"I saw the picture of it online," said Ari.

"Then you know." Jackson went into the narrow corridor and pointed at the new door. "There were wood splinters all over, like a train just blasted through."

"Which a neighbor heard," Ari shook his head. "But the residents of this house

were completely oblivious."

"Your English is pretty good."

"I was taught by an itinerant Hebrew scholar. They know all the languages."

Mangioni barked a laugh.

"Anyway, we thought of that," Jackson said, aping Carrington's remark on the subject. "We figured Jerry and his family didn't hear because they were deep asleep. Really deep."

"Phenomenally deep, I would say."

"So we came in--"

"Through the gap, or did you reach through and turn the knob? That hole was very big."

"You *are* picky. We reached through, just like the perps did. We know that because I checked before turning the knob. It's the kind of lock that pops open when you turn it."

"And it was unlocked."

"Yes."

"He...they...could have turned it while leaving."

"Okay, that's possible."

"You of course checked the sliding door in the basement?"

"Sure," said Jackson uneasily. His discomfort increased when Ari posed his next question.

"Did you radio your headquarters for assistance?"

"Uh..." Jackson turned to Mangioni. "We called for backup, right?"

"That's the procedure," said Mangioni, who then said nothing.

It might be the procedure, but it certainly was no answer.

"We called out and no one answered," Jackson continued--reluctantly, Ari thought. So much for his eagerness to share the gore. "We went through this way and found Jerry."

Their footsteps thudded loudly in the empty house. They sounded like a herd of grazing wildebeests.

Jackson pointed to a spot near the picture window. "He was slumped forward."

"Would you mind standing where the chair was?"

Jackson went over to the window, facing inside. Ari moved next to him and faced outside. The murky weather was bringing the day to a premature end. The river was a gray mass, the island invisible behind the blowing sheets of rain. "What was he looking at when he died?"

"Nothing. He was asleep."

"Was he wearing pajamas?"

Jackson didn't answer. Mangioni said, "Half and half. Trousers, pajama top."

"Shoes?"

"Yes."

"Socks?"

"I don't remember."

"So he fell asleep wearing his street clothes," Jackson fumed. "I do it all the time. If he was awake, he was probably watching the moon. They say he was a moony kind of guy. Have you seen his crappy paintings? I mean, there you have him, right there."

"But he must have been asleep," Ari said, looking out at the river. "Or else he would have heard the killer coming up behind him."

"There were thick carpets then. The perp could have sneaked up easy."

"Which means Mr. Riggins was shot first, or else he would have heard his wife and children being murdered upstairs." Ari turned away from the window. "But that only reverses the problem, doesn't it? Is there any evidence that one man could have held him prisoner while his compatriot went upstairs? The newspapers inferred two or more killers were involved."

It was a perfectly logical scenario. Ari was puzzled by their obvious reluctance to accept it.

"There wasn't any sign of a struggle." Jackson hooked his thumbs on his gunbelt. It was not intended as a threatening gesture. He was just growing tired.

"Officer Jackson, the door was smashed in, with a great deal of violence. How could anyone sleep through such noise? And in all that time, Mr. Riggins could have gathered his family and escaped through the front door. Unless, of course, someone was waiting for them to do just that."

When neither of them responded, Ari continued:

"But then, why scatter the family back into their separate rooms before killing them?"

"Exactly," Mangioni nodded eagerly, as though Ari had successfully contradicted himself. "Really, we only think it was one man."

"Your newspapers have a lot to answer for!" Ari threw up his hands in exasperation.

The officers found this reaction amusing. Ari was just another typical, excitable foreigner. They relaxed--just as Ari intended.

"You know," said Jackson almost jovially, "they had a hell of a splatter pattern on that window, a full cone. Gore, bits of brain. Part of the skull broke the glass."

None of which they saw from the sidewalk...?

Mangioni tapped the floor with his toe and added in a low voice, "But no sign of cavitation, no back spatter, no pattern transfer.

"Just shows the perp was careful," Jackson said, pleased with himself. This was why he had agreed to a walk-through. He intended to batter Ari's imagination with the horror of the murders. Ari made a show of concealing a shudder, behaving as though the spot was no longer tenable.

"I suppose we can go upstairs, now."

"Ready and willing." Jackson preceded him, with a bounce in his step that drew a frown from Mangioni and a secret shake of the head from Ari. They entered the master bedroom first. Jackson switched on the light and went over to the corner window.

"Mrs. Riggins was laid out so..." He stretched his arms and leaned over, as if laying her to rest. "There wasn't any expiratory blood. She died instantly, like all the rest. The tech geeks say she must have been sitting up for the blood to spray on the headboard the way it did, that if she'd been lying down the pillow would've soaked up most of the blood. I don't buy it. I've seen my share of gunshot wounds, and lots of the time blood acts pretty much the way it wants. She was lying down, I'm sure of it."

"Because if she was sitting up she would have been awake," Ari observed. "She would have heard the intruders."

"You got it."

"And she would have heard the shot--if someone else was killed first."

Jackson crossed his arms and nodded. "That's the way I see it."

"What did the toxicology report say?"

"What toxicology report?" Jackson asked.

"If Mrs. Riggins had taken a sleeping pill, that might explain why she didn't wake up."

Jackson's eyes widened. He almost smiled. "Yeah, I see your point." He shook his head. "I don't think the forensic people bothered with her blood. Cause of death was pretty obvious."

"Maybe I've seen too many American crime movies," Ari said.

"Come again?"

"They always say that in cases of violent death the coroner always writes up a toxicology report."

"You've been watching too many American movies."

Once again, Ari took up a position next to Jackson, who seemed a little discomfited by the repeat performance. He recalled what the young robber had said to him in the Chinese grocery just before he stabbed him. Did all Americans think people of Arab descent were homosexual? But he already knew Americans were adverse to the simplest platonic same-sex intimacy.

As before, instead of facing into the room, Ari faced out. "If she had been awake, and sitting here...she could have seen the river."

"Well yeah."

"Was she wearing slippers?"

Jackson was stumped. He glanced at Mangioni.

"Yes."

"Were they wet?"

"You mean, did she go outside in them? It wasn't raining that night."

"Ah, yes," Ari sighed.

Jackson looked at him closely. "Why would she go outside in her night gown at that hour?"

If she went down to the river, she might have gotten the slippers wet on the narrow beach. But Ari decided not to press them on the idea.

"You're right, I'm trying too hard to play detective," he told the officers. "By the way, were any tracking dogs brought here?"

"The K-9 people?" From Jackson's tone Ari summoned an image of men with beagle faces sniffing along the floorboards. "Not that I know of. You know anything about that, Mangy?"

It was Mangioni's turn to give Ari a close look. "No..."

"There wasn't anything here for the bloodhounds," Jackson continued. "What are you getting at? Toxicology reports. Coon dogs. What are you thinking they'd find? This wasn't a goddamn opium den."

"Too many American movies, again," Ari shrugged helplessly. "Shall we go to the boys' rooms?"

A general deflation affected all three of the men. Jackson recounted the body positions and fatal wounds in a monotone while Ari absorbed the details with a listless

sorrow that was made more profound by the possibility Joshua had been awake when he was killed. His room was closest to the master bedroom and he would have certainly heard any noise coming from there. He asked if either boy had been wearing slippers. Mangioni answered no, but that Joshua's covers had been thrown back, as though he had been getting ready to jump out of bed. Besides, in a house filled with the usual rugs and wall-to-wall carpets, impatient young boys would not be inclined to waste time with footwear.

Ari left all the bedroom lights on. They descended the stairs in a somber mood. If it had been Jackson's objective to make the house unpalatable to Ari, he had only succeeded in making it unpalatable to himself. The address on Beach Court was a morgue, and he now obviously wanted out of it as quickly as possible. It was with a little difficulty that Ari unobtrusively ducked into the kitchen to turn off the kitchen light, then guided them back into the living room.

"Just one more small question," he said, turning off the living room light and stepping toward the picture window, as though to point out something in the yard. Then he jumped. "My cat!"

He raced through the foyer and out the front door, running all the way down to the gazebo. He glanced under the roof and bench seats, then trotted back to the house. He could see the two police officers watching him.

"I was sure I saw him," Ari apologized once he was back inside. He was soaked. Jackson and Mangioni backed away from him a bit as he shook off several layers of water.

"No cat would be out in this weather," Jackson said.

"This is the kind of weather he escaped into."

"Could've been a possum or raccoon," Mangioni reasoned. "There are plenty of them out here."

"I don't think I know what those are," said Ari.

"Sure, you've seen them," said Jackson. "You may not've recognized them, though. They're our number one and two roadkills respectively."

"I'm afraid my knowledge of the local fauna is inadequate."

"What was that small question you had for us?" Jackson said, now openly impatient.

"Oh. I just wanted to re-confirm that your department has no idea as to who was killed first."

"We got plenty of ideas," said Jackson. "Is that all we can do for you?"

They backed down the driveway, pausing at the bottom to set their wreath against the mailbox post. Ari waved at the cruiser, then closed the garage doors.

Inside, he carried his fish to the kitchen table and peeled back the foil. The carp was cold, but he had worked up a stupendous appetite. He had killed three people that morning, and had spent the evening studying the deaths of four others. He picked at the carp with his fingers, spitting out bones as he went.

That he had been lied to in large measure did not bother him. So far as he was concerned, the police were not in the truth business. That they were involved in some type of cover-up was a given. Nor did this give Ari cause for dismay. Police worldwide were corrupt--or were, as the Chinese grocery store manager had politely put it, 'mixed

up'. The Americans applied a little more care to the natural ills of law enforcement, but their abundant rules and regulations protected the offenders as much as the offended.

What was being hidden? Why, for example, would Jackson and Mangioni insist that they had not observed Jerry Riggins' body through the picture window when they approached the front door? Ari had seen the two men perfectly clearly as he returned from the gazebo. Were they disguising the fact that they had seen something else inside besides the body? Or did they want to de-emphasize the fact that Riggins was looking outside--was watching for something? Or both?

This last idea reminded Ari that his original notion had gone all wobbly. Moria Riggins had inherited a fortune. Her notions shop, and Jerry's painting, were the pastimes of a pampered class--of which Ari knew something about.

His mind weakened. He could hear the rushing feet of Joshua and William Riggins racing down the stairs to the living room. Gift time, for children, was a universal cause for elation. Ari was not terribly familiar with Christian customs, but he had heard that, on this particular holiday, celebrants peppered the floor with new toys for their young ones. The Riggins family had been wiped out the night before Christmas Eve. Had Joshua and William seen the wrapped treasures under the tree? Or had their parents hidden them away somewhere, to emphasize the morning surprise?

Ari went over to the sink and washed his hands. He stared at the fish. Without realizing it, he had consumed nearly half. But he had not served it over rice. His fishmonger would have berated him severely.

What was left would have made an excellent meal for a cat. Ari closed the foil and put the carp in the refrigerator. He poured several fingers of whiskey into a coffee

cup, turned off the kitchen light, and shuffled out onto the front porch.

"Sphinx!" he called out.

The rain had stopped. There were even a few stars poking through the clouds. With any luck, tomorrow would be clear and Ari would be able to arrange another meeting with Detective Carrington.

He stepped onto the sidewalk and looked through the living room window. He could almost see the splatter pattern: Jerry Riggins slumped forward, cranium shattered, brain matter loosened like a dropped platter of scrambled eggs. What else? A Christmas tree, gifts, furniture...and an intruder?

He walked down the sidewalk a short distance, turned, and came back slowly, trying to re-create the approach of the two policemen. From lower down, a dozen or so yards from the road, he caught an oblique view of the living room, including the far corner of the ceiling. Drawing up directly in front of the window, he stopped, sipped at his glass, and contemplated the empty living room. Ample light filtered down the stairwell.

He went upstairs and closed all the bedroom doors. Coming back down, it was dark enough for Ari to feel the need to guide himself using the handrail.

From the sidewalk, the living room was now a black tomb. It was possible that two police officers, though alerted to trouble, would fail to see the grisly interior. But the room was now completely empty, with no shapes or angles to catch a stray beam of light. The Christmas tree, the easy chair, the gifts, other furniture--a coffee table, a couch, a pair of lampstands.

Why were you sitting in the dark, Mr. Riggins?

The better to see outside, Mr. Ciminon.

Was Officer Jackson right? Were you gazing at the moon?

Ari swore.

Mr. Riggins, were your Christmas tree lights on?

He had not thought to ask that of Jackson and Mangioni. Christmas in an American home was not a domestic scene he was overly familiar with.

You've been watching too many American movies.

That was what Jackson had said when Ari asked about toxicology reports and bloodhounds. But American movies were about all Ari had to go on when it came to this particular set of customs. He had never known that many Christians personally, and they had kept their holidays to themselves. But he had seen one fairly recent Hollywood production that showed the American president lighting up a national Christmas tree. Was this scene reenacted on a smaller scale in homes across the land?

Were there tree lights? And were they turned on? The minutiae of his adopted culture was strung across his path like a million tripwires.

Ari paused, brooding. He paced back down the sidewalk.

"Sphinx, you yellow devil! Are you out here?"

From the dark river some geese honked querulously, like neighbors protesting against a noisy party next door.

He turned, walked a few steps, and resumed his oblique study of the living room.

"Ah..." he said, smiling. The room was dark. What he saw was in his mind. The memory of something he had seen, but not noted, before closing the bedroom doors.

A ton of hours fell on his shoulders. Ari dragged himself upstairs. He did not so

much as glance at the computer. He sprawled on his mattress and closed his eyes.

He couldn't sleep at first. Something was missing. He was surprised that he had automatically crooked his knees to accommodate Sphinx. How quickly new habits were formed. New...friendships.

ELEVEN

He looked around, peered into to darkness beyond the truck lights, then lay the M-16 on the ground and went over for the scimitar. The second prisoner, watching him return, bellowed fear and dismay.

"Be silent," said Ghaith, and used the blade to cut the zip tie binding the man's hands. "Take the Bongo."

The man rolled over, his eyes bulging. "Allah--"

--has nothing to do with this. Take the Bongo."

"I don't know why they took me," the man sobbed, massaging his wrists. "I'm innocent--"

"There's a slight chance you are," Ghaith stopped him abruptly. Taking note of the man's accent, he added, "Use the Bongo to move out of Sadr City, and fast."

"I was a translator for the Americans," the man moaned, as though trying to ruin his incredible good luck with a confession.

"There you have it. Move to America. Now go!"

The man scrambled to his feet and ran with a limp to the Kia mini-truck. The engine was still running. Dragging himself into the cab, the man quickly shifted into gear and tore a wide circle in the clearing, nearly ditching in the canal before straightening out and disappearing up the farm road.

Ghaith in the meantime was gathering up the weapons and ammunition from the dead Mujahideen and tossing them into the pickup truck, watched silently by the last prisoner, who had worked himself back onto his knees. His hands still bound, he

surveyed the corpses around him with awe and loathing. There was no need for Ghaith to explain what he was doing, but the steel edge of resolve that had made him a pure survivor had worn thin. He needed to talk. And he had a captive audience.

"This will bring in good money. A lot of the weapons caches have been destroyed. The uprising can always use more guns and ammunition. Pretty soon, the Revolutionary Guard will have a regular pipeline into the country. Then you'll see. They think this is hell? Just wait. And they don't care who they kill. They're just priming the pump, so that the killing goes on. That man who went off in the Bongo--he wasn't one of them. He wasn't one of anybody. That's all that it takes. But I'll sell these back to the killers. Guaranteed income, eh? They kill, I kill them, I take the weapons for resale, and the circle remains unbroken."

He did not bother explaining who 'they' were. He was a little rattled, after all, and was mixing identities. But in the end it didn't matter. It applied equally to everyone.

Finally, with all the automatic weapons and ammunition belts and pouches secured under a canvas in the back of the Toyota, Ghaith took up the scimitar and strode over to the prisoner. He began walking circles around the young man, flashing the heavy sword back and forth as if it was a toy. He was filled with scorn, with anger, with a manic energy. The young man winced. He was all of sixteen.

"What were you doing, eh?" Ghaith demanded harshly. "Why did they choose you? Were you with the Americans? Have you joined one of those idiotic brigades? Did they want you for ransom?" Ghaith stopped for a moment. "I'm ranting. No, not ransom. Of course not. They wanted your head. More than any of these others, they wanted your head. And look where it got me. Are you proud of yourself?"

He resumed his circular pacing, whipping the scimitar back and forth.

"Who should we blame for all of this? The Americans? The British? The Iranians? The Syrians? Can we point at someone else? Of course we can. We point at everyone! But I've known all along...from way back. Long before the wars, before the gassings, before the missiles. Don't worry, I'm not going to blame Allah, who is so great that we're mere pebbles of shit on His ass. It's us. All of us. I'm not talking about Kurds or Arabs or Persians or dictators or democrats. I mean all who are here. We're animals. We can't help ourselves. You put us in a cage and lock the door, we eat ourselves alive. This is just a small part of the cage. You know, of course, that I'm talking about the world. It's a cage. One giant hopping-mad cage."

Ghaith stopped and drew several deep breaths, almost sobs. He dug the point of the scimitar into the ground and listened to the mad rush of water from the canal outlets.

The prisoner took a deep breath. "What are you going to do to me?"

Ghaith shook, as though startled out of his dreadful vision. He went over to the young man and dropped to his knees in front of him, letting the sword fall to the side. He wrapped his arms around the boy and drew him in.

"What were you doing? How could you? You are the last one! The last one! Don't you understand?"

"Father," the boy began to weep. "Father..."

"I'll get you out of here," said Ghaith. "I'll find a way. But for now, go home. You must take care of your mother, who is sick unto death."

Ari awoke to the not-too-distant distant sound of a motor. Rising, he looked out the studio window and caught several glimpses of Howie Nottoway walking purposefully back and forth across his lawn. Ari craned his head and noted the clear blue sky. Perfect.

He switched on his computer, showered and dressed, then sat down to read his emails.

There were two.

The first:

'\$532.67 spent. \$3000 limit. Do not exceed.'

"Mos zibby!" Ari swore.

The second had the old-fashioned, unpunctuated immediacy of a telegram:

'Noon Wal-Mart Forest Hill I'll find you.'

Ari did not recognize either sender's address. There was no response to his request, but he was used to anonymous indifference and did not dwell on it.

After eating his last gulab jamun and downing a cup of tea, he went outside and did a quick tour of his yard. There was no sign of Sphinx. He was about to go out on the street and walk over to Howie's when a man and woman came scooting up the small strip of beach that ran between the Mackenzie property and what even Ari thought of as the Riggins' land.

"Hello!" the man called out.

Ari nodded amiably.

They were an attractive couple, as though consciously selected for some optimal genetic configuration. Their relative youth (late twenties) enhanced the prospects for beautiful children. Yet Ari sense they were childless, probably through choice, reserving

their love for their reflections.

"I'm Matt Mackenzie," said the man as he came up the slope. He held out his hand, then stopped. "Oh...I'm sorry. Do you..."

"Shake hands?" Ari held out his right hand and Matt Mackenzie took hold.

"This is my wife, Tracy."

Tracy Mackenzie was staring at the men's hand-grip, her look of revulsion scarcely hidden. Shaking hands with a fucking, jogging A-rab, when everyone knew they used their bare hands to wipe the shit from their ass. No doubt she would demand her husband take a shower before she allowed him to touch her again.

When Ari let go of Matt's hand he touched his chest over his heart. He allowed himself a small burst of chagrin. Just as some habits were too-easily acquired, others were too ingrained to dismiss.

Matt suffered the morning chill boldly in shorts, T-shirt and sandals. He had the sleek muscular grace of an Olympic swimmer, but a face that was curiously hairless, without even a trace of stubble. Ari found this strange and effeminate. Did the man use a depilatory?

Tracy was not so much in love with the outdoors, taking cover under slacks and a light jacket that did nothing to disguise her figure. A lot of care had gone into her foray into nature, which began at her doorstep. She met the dawn with a completely natural facial palette, with her strawberry blonde hair scattered in a textured updo. Ari rather disliked her immediately, but could not help feeling aroused. Even from ten feet away her sex called to him like a hurdle to a horse. He subdued his interest as best he could.

Tracy did not offer her hand.

"We saw you wandering around in the yard," said Matt.

"I was looking for my cat."

A veil of doubt fell over Tracy's face, as if her worst nightmare had come to life right next door: an Arab with a cat.

"We're not exactly cat people," said Matt quickly, as though to curb a less neighborly comment from his wife.

"What a shame."

"I was wondering..." Matt's smile was like a beacon overtop of his hairless chin. "We're going to have a party in a couple of nights. Could we borrow your barbecue?"

Ari had been on the verge of accepting an invitation. A party at the Mackenzie's would probably be most informative. Fortunately, he did not jump the gun. No invitation was forthcoming.

"I'm afraid I don't have a barbecue yet."

Matt's eyes bugged, as though he had just met a man without a body.

"I'm quite new to your country."

"Really? You don't have any accent, and I've heard some pretty wild ones." Matt nodded broadly, a man of the world.

Gambling that they had not spoken to Howie about him, Ari said, "I represent the *Cirque du Soleil*."

"No kidding!" Tracy gasped. Her husband gave her a bewildered look. "You know, that super-circus. We saw a video of one of their shows, remember? Saltimbanco."

"Oh...yeah," Matt said doubtfully.

"You said you'd take me to Vegas to see their permanent show."

"Go to Vegas to see a *circus*?" Matt said even more doubtfully

"I'm not one of the performers," Ari said with a trace of sorrow. "I only help arrange the touring shows."

"They perform all over the world," said starry-eyed Tracy, who had very quickly forgotten about her neighbor's cat and unseemly hygiene.

"Precisely. The *Cirque* required someone with a knack for organization and a flair for the major languages."

"Oh wow."

Matt looked from his wife to Ari and decided his fairytale grin was not misplaced. Ari was a great guy, and not just because he was his new neighbor. His toes were tickled by the perfectly managed lawn.

"What a lawn. Is this like fescue or something? Mind if I borrow your mower?"

"Sorry."

"No mower?"

"It appears the Riggins had a prepaid contract with a landscaper. I've inherited the service."

The Mackenzie smiles vanished. They seemed to think Ari rude for summoning up memories of the crime. Or perhaps it was their inability to sustain a coherent wrinkle that made them seem callous. Their faces were imperfect forgeries of real humans. Tracy attempted to close her jacket, but only succeeded in drawing her breasts into a single, impressive lump.

"Yeah, well, it was a crying shame," said Matt, adding a *tsk* for good measure.

"They were good people, I've been given to understand," said Ari.

"From a distance," said Matt.

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, sometimes great doesn't look so great from close up." Matt glanced at his wife, took note of her accumulated bosom, and appeared to decide that from close up some things were better than great.

"I did a little research after I moved in, on the internet."

Matt brightened. "You've got a laptop?"

"Alas..."

Matt shrugged. The urge to borrow subsided. "I guess you saw all the stuff about them. The awards and all. God's gift to the Tri-Cities and surrounding counties."

"You don't seem--"

"Oh, they were okay," said Tracy, feeling left out. "But *just* okay. I mean, they were average. I mean, I liked Moria...even a lot. We were even friends maybe even. Jerry was a little less than okay. He was kind of gung-ho on the boys and all."

As well he should be, Ari thought, though Tracy made it sound like a vice.

"How long did they live here?"

"Don't know. Not real long." Tracy tried to apply some lines of thought to her brow. Ari, who tried not to think about sex, would have liked to massage that brow, as well as to the body attached to it. It must be like skating on hot ice. "A few years. I think she said Joshua was already three or four when they moved in. Little Bill was still in diapers. We came...when was it, Matt?"

Less than three years ago, and she couldn't remember the year she arrived. How

much of the kayakers' 'product' had she been ingesting?

"Back in..." Matt Mackenzie struggled with a time frame that extended beyond a week. "Almost two years ago."

Ari noticed that the monotonous, rolling squall of Howie Nottoway's lawn mower had stopped. Unless he walked down to the end of Beach Court, he would not be able to see his new neighbor exchanging pleasantries with the Mackenzies.

"That long, y'think?" Tracy spent a moment delving into the murky past.

"Where did they live before?"

"Up in Caroline County, about thirty miles from here. Jerry had a so-called studio barn for his stuff. He'd paint a square and call it Country Tree Number One Thousand. Moria couldn't take it."

"The art or living in the country?" said Ari, thinking that if Jerry Riggins' art was so universally despised, even by his own wife, how could he have managed all of those one-man shows before he was killed? Putting on a gallery display must involve some expense. Or was Jerry's merely the talent of a renter?

"The country," Tracy said. "Especially in winter. They had a wood stove. She hated that. A lot of smoke and no heat, she said. Then she started her own business and they moved to the city."

Tracy, still dazzled by Ari's job description, saw the Riggins' past more clearly than her own. She moved closer, and a part of Ari moved closer to her. He prayed neither of them noticed, but Tracy seemed to have a trained eye for such things and produced a knowing moue.

"Then you moved in and became friends with her." Ari passed an expansive

glance over the river. He noted the primary colors of several kayaks headed for the rapids, the double-edged paddles flying, as though the rowers were intent on self-destruction. "You were very fortunate to get such a scenic view."

"Lucky as hell--" Tracy began. Her words were cut short by a sharp glance from her husband. She let go of her jacket and her breasts sprang back to attention, as much sentinels as enticements. "Yeah," she concluded lamely.

"The view from this house is also quite scenic," Ari continued. "I understand Moria Riggins purchased it with money she inherited."

"Not that it helped them in the end," said Matt with genuine bitterness.

"Besides," Tracy said, still warmed by Ari's Circus of the Sun, "There isn't any inheritance. Not yet. The Massingtons are still alive. The parents, I mean. They co-signed on the house, and one day Moria..." She hesitated. "One day she would have inherited."

"Have you spoken with her parents since that night?"

"The police brought them out to the house. I heard Heather Massington—well, it was more than crying. She like totally lost control. They haven't been back. They have a villa in Tuscany. That's where they are now, I think."

"Tuscany," Matt aspirated lowly, as though all the luck in the world had landed on that piece of Italian real estate, without a trace of grief. Then he started. "The people you bought the house from...they didn't tell you what had happened? You didn't ask why it went so cheap?"

Ari assumed the mask of a man foolish beyond reason. "I saw a very good deal. I only asked if flooding was a problem. By the way, is flooding a problem here?"

"We haven't been here long enough to know," Matt answered. "I hear every few years the James gets a little wild. We don't keep anything valuable in our basement."

"I'll bear that in mind. So there have been no major floods recently?"

"Nope."

Tracy emptied out the distance between them with a long step that flowed like warm honeyed tea and placed a hand on Ari's arm. It was his turn to go a little squeamish. She was using her left hand.

At this close range he learned what fueled her 'come hither' aura. Part of it, at least. The smell of gin was potent on her breath. Ari was tempted to look at his watch. She must have started drinking...well, very early. It was still very early.

Loyalty, Ari. Loyalty.

But it was an oath that was already violated. A touch from Tracy was like a night in a bordello.

"You've been to Paris?" she breathed. "And Rome? And..." Her grasp of foreign lands rapidly faded. "All those other places?"

"We've been there," Matt said in a griping tone.

"Where?" his wife asked, still gazing up at Ari.

"All those places. You remember." He was aggrieved that she should so soon forget all the great landmarks he'd taken her to, but he used the opportunity to tell Ari that he was a systems analyst. This sounded like a very vague profession to Ari. There were social welfare systems, weapons systems, solar systems...the list was infinite. He assumed it had something to do with computers, and suspected Matt had told him this as proof he could afford to take his wife to all those swell places and buy a house on the

river, to boot.

"It was Howie Nottoway who told me about what happened here."

If Ari had forced them to drink sour milk he would have expected a similar reaction. But which did they find more distasteful: the murders, or Howie Nottoway?

Tracy began to draw back, then decided Ari's arm was too nice and strong to abandon entirely and left her fingers draped over his sleeve. Ari had had no personal experience with inebriated women and found it difficult to distinguish between the woman who was loose and the woman who was tight. Smiling at Tracy, he decided there was little to choose between them. Which was entirely too bad. He had a great thirst.

Not since the week before the invasion. Astonishing.

"Were you at home the night of the murders?" Ari asked a little hopelessly, as if it was more likely that they had stopped for the night in Trieste before resuming their journey to Athens.

"We didn't hear anything," said Matt, cutting right to the chase.

In all likelihood he was telling the truth. Whatever cocktails of liquor and drugs that they assembled and consumed during a typical day would lead to a typical night of near-comatose oblivion. And since the killings took place during the holiday season, it was even more probable that the Mackenzies had been dead to the world while their neighbors were being slaughtered.

But they had been up and waiting for the kayakers.

Was there some kind of schedule? Ari doubted it. Last night's weather would have chased even hardened boaters off the river. But it seemed even less likely that Matt and Tracy would sit up night after night waiting for their shipments.

"We can't see Beach Court Road from our house," Matt continued. "We can barely see the Riggins house. When all the police hoopla began, we didn't have a clue."

"We heard about it on the news." Tracy seemed oddly pleased by this, aloofness from neighbors, even friendly neighbors, being the height of fashion. And she was fashionable.

Ari was weighing the pros and cons of asking them about the rockets on the island when a loud motor revved in the direction of the Nottoway house. Hearing a tremendous buzz, Ari lifted a brow of inquiry.

"That's Nottoway's wood chipper," Matt snarled, and for the first time since he had met them, the Mackenzies proved they could impose wrinkles on their faces when properly motivated.

"Do you have a problem with Mr. Nottoway?"

They had drifted over to the gazebo. Ari gestured for them to seat themselves, but they declined. They suddenly seemed aware that this conversation had wandered, when they had intended it to be brief and to the point.

"Actually, it's about Nottoway that we came to see you," Matt began uncertainly. Tracy nodded with some vigor. She had allowed her fingers to drift away from Ari, but they had left sensuous invisible vermin in the sleeve of his jacket. Ari was scarcely able to refrain from scratching his arm.

"We like to think of this as a live-and-let-live community," said Matt, looking towards the house as if the Rigginses were still there to nod agreement.

"And Howie Nottoway doesn't share your concept?"

"We call him 'Achtung Howie'," said Tracy, carefully nudging a bang out of her

eyes, but not so far as to disturb her all-natural just-out-of-bed but ready-for-the-Great-Indoors coif. Tracy sent a howl of a smirk in her husband's direction. "Tell him about the petition."

"Oh yeah. We were only here a few months when Howie showed up at our door and asked us to sign this damn paper. He wanted to ban drinking in public--including your own yard--outdoor parties, shouting, swearing, public displays of affection...you name it."

"He even wanted to ban smoking in your own house," Tracy added, nodding at the pack of Winstons bulging in Ari's shirt pocket.

"No," said Ari, genuinely amazed.

"Oh, hey," said Matt, noticing the cigarettes for the first time. "Can I bum one of those?"

"Certainly."

"And a light?"

Both men lit up. Matt seemed to relish knocking ashes onto the fescue he so much admired. This close to Howie-land, it must have provided him with the ecstasy of social revolution.

"You don't mind us having parties or..." Tracy applied her mind. "You don't mind us having some fun every now and then, do you?"

"Isn't your country's motto 'the pursuit of happiness'?"

"You got it!" Tracy exclaimed in relief. Ari was one of those good foreigners who understood the underlying philosophical principles of his adopted country.

His cadging instinct satisfied, Matt leaned against a gazebo post and puffed away.

Now that he was at ease, he could volunteer information without being prodded by Ari.

"You want my opinion, if Jerry and Moria hadn't been killed, they would have been in Splitsville by now."

"I'm sorry..."

"Separated. Divorced."

"I thought they were the perfect couple."

"Then explain why the same day those goons showed up and snuffed them, Jerry was going off like a maniac."

"You saw something?"

"We heard him screaming his head off."

"And whopping the hell out of something," Tracy said. "It sounded like..."

"Like he was slamming doors," Matt continued. "I mean really slamming. It went on for twenty minutes or so."

"What time was it?"

"It was just starting to get dark. That time of year? Maybe five-ish."

For something like this to happen in broad daylight, Howie Nottoway had said.

"Did you call the police?"

"Hell no." Tracy gave a start, as if realizing her spontaneous answer might be too revealing. "I mean, it was a domestic thing. You don't call the cops every time you have a tiff."

The look she shot her husband hinted that if such were the case, the police would have a permanent camp on their lawn.

"We don't know if it was domestic," Matt said uneasily.

"Well he wouldn't be yelling 'Moria' if he was chopping wood."

Ari thought a moment. "Did Jerry Riggins own a gun?"

Matt relaxed and chuckled.

"Jerry was terrified of them," Tracy answered. "He said more people were killed accidentally than ever shot a bad guy." She parsed her sentence, found it wanting, but let it stand. It was understood that people knew what you intended to say even if you didn't exactly say it. Ari smiled, but he knew better than to accuse the Americans of corrupting their own language. The plague of unfocused meaning was worldwide. Tracy continued: "Why do you ask?"

"In this case, a gun may have saved Jerry and his family."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Would you like to come inside?"

At first they thought Ari meant the gazebo. Tracy stepped back when she saw him look toward the house.

"Oh no," she said immediately.

"What's the matter, afraid of ghosts?" But Matt too seemed uneasy at the prospect and allowed himself to be drawn by his wife's reluctance. "I guess we don't have time."

"You need to analyze a system?" Ari said politely.

"Uh...something like that. We just came over to...uh..."

"Enjoy your party. It can't possibly disturb me."

As they walked away, Tracy suddenly stopped and turned. "You're invited!"

Matt stopped, too, and drew a visual line between his wife and Ari. "Oh. Yeah. Sure."

"I might take you up on that." The American phrase sat nicely on Ari's tongue.

Matt suddenly brightened. "Hey, did you see the news this morning?"

"I don't have a television," Ari said.

This admission floored Matt, who took a moment to recover. "There was a big shoot-out in the West End. Three people killed!" He grinned broadly. "Welcome to the U.S. of A!"

Howie Nottoway seemed prepared for any dangerous alien that came his way. Not Ari's kind of alien, but extraterrestrial. Yellow eye goggles would ward off retinal burn, as well as keep his eyes safe from any inanimate object an oncoming Martian might toss in his face. Large Husqvarna ear protectors (which might well double as a commando radio headset that allowed him to eavesdrop on Venusian communications) would screen out alpha-beta waves designed to garble his brain. While a safety helmet was just the thing to put a dent in the extended gear of any flying saucer that swooped down for a landing.

Ari approached warily, not wanting to startle Howie so much that he put an arm instead of a log down the hopper of the wood chipper. But Howie must have had eyes in the back of his head, or his helmet had tiny rearview mirrors, because he switched off the chipper motor and turned to greet Ari before he was halfway across the yard. It was then Ari noted that the helmet did indeed have tiny rearview mirrors.

"Good morning, Mr. Nottoway!" he said with gooey provincial cheer.

Howie nodded with friendly indecision. Perhaps he did not want to get Ari's name wrong. Perhaps he had forgotten it already. The memory of the average American

seemed to be extraordinarily short.

"Hey there," Howie said.

Ari extended his hand and waited for Howie to remove his thick work gloves and take it. He took it readily enough--but did not remove his gloves. Where Ari came from, such an insult could get you killed. Justifiably so, in his opinion.

He smiled.

In fact, Nottoway appeared strangely reluctant to remove any of his gear. This may have been a less-than-discreet indication that his yard work could not wait for neighborly chitchat. That, as Ari's old English phrase book had put it, he had to make hay while the sun was shining. Or perhaps he believed Ari might jump forward and knock him on the head, box his ears, poke out his eyes and rip out his fingernails, contingencies for which he was well-prepared. All he was missing was a Kevlar vest.

"Your machine is quite impressive," Ari said in a voice he hoped was loud enough to be heard through the ear protectors.

"Getting rid of this old wood pile," Howie said, raising his voice so he could hear himself. He pointed at a few cords of firewood stacked at edge of the yard.

"But winter will be arriving soon," said Ari. The wood looked perfectly seasoned to him. "Won't you need it?"

"I can always get more. This is all buggy and dried out. A real fire hazard. And the HOA doesn't approve of it."

Howie was wasting a good natural product, so far as Ari could see. Having noted persistent litter on the roadsides, however, he concluded it was the prevalent mindset. Use and toss, or don't use and toss. It was better than throwing away lives wholesale.

"Do you use your fireplace very often?" Ari asked. "I ask because I noticed the Riggins don't seem to have ever used theirs."

Howie seemed dismayed by what he was partially hearing, and finally removed his ear protectors to hear it better. "You said you looked in the fireplace?"

"Is that abnormal?"

"No. You should check it regularly. But...you should get a professional to take a look at it. You know, a chimneysweep. To check out the creosote deposits...and stuff." Howie's voice had taken a step back. He removed his goggles. "You find anything?"

"In the chimney?"

"Uh...yeah."

"Is there something I should be looking for?"

"Uh...like what?"

"I'm just seeking advice. We don't have chimneys like that in Sicily. Can animals come down it? Or get stuck?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Howie, removing his gloves. "Most houses around here have grills to keep out pests. So what...you looked up the flue?"

"I noticed the chimney damper open so I checked inside. Would you expect me to find something?" Ari stepped across to the chipper, peered inside the hopper, and tried not to imagine what some men in his homeland would use it for. He glanced over at the garden shed. The door was open.

Howie had taken off his head gear and now stood like a man who had only just learned that no earthly power could resolve his sins. Ari had seen plenty of frightened men in his day, and this was most definitely one of them. It was silent fear, however.

Anyone who showed fear too openly only drew attention to himself.

"The chimney seems fine," Ari continued. "I don't think I'll be using it much, though. Central air is so much more efficient. And cleaner."

"Yes," Howie said, finally managing a smile. This was something he could relate to.

"I had some visitors this morning. The Mackenzies."

Howie could relate to this, too, only in a different direction. His hard-won smile vanished. "They're a pair."

"Indeed," said Ari. "They told me you tried to get them to sign a petition."

"Yes!" Howie exclaimed, finding courage in disapproval. "This neighborhood was going to the dogs. I even found syringes at the end of Beach Court. Kids were coming down here, shooting up, and just throwing the needles out their car windows."

"That's terrible," said Ari.

"That's just the beginning," said Howie, quickly warming to the topic. "Really, what happened to that family...you could see it coming."

"What do you mean?"

"Things were out of whack. This was a safe, quiet community. Then you get kids from outside, nobody keeping an eye on them, parking near the river and doing whatever they wanted. The crime rate went up. Yes, it was petty. I had a couple things stolen before I got smart and double-locked my shed. But...the whole atmosphere...it seemed to...I don't know...*infect* some of the people living here."

"Like the Mackenzies?"

"Oh them...they're part of the problem. Those parties they have..."

"Did the Riggins have parties?"

"Sure, but nothing like next door to them. They get wild. You'll see."

"Is all of this why you joined the Neighborhood Watch?"

"I *began* the Neighborhood Watch around here. Submitted all the forms, met with the precinct commander, put up the signs, got together volunteers."

"Are there a lot of volunteers?"

"Do you want to join?" Howie asked eagerly.

"I'd like to get settled in, first."

"Sure, sure. We've got about a dozen people." His face fell. "Not all of them are that dependable, right?"

"Was someone from your group patrolling the area the night of the murders?"

Howie Nottoway stiffened. "Well...yeah...it was Bobby Lovelace's turn. He swears he was doing the route and he didn't see anything. But he's..."

"Not trustworthy?"

"He parties with the Mackenzies."

"Ah. Well, you must admit, Tracy Mackenzie is hard to resist."

"I don't admit nothing," Howie said in a surly tone.

"I didn't mean to offend you." Ari made an apologetic gesture. "You seem to have doubts about anyone who associates with the Mackenzies."

"It's nothing I can prove..." Howie took a deep breath. "I wouldn't be surprised if they're into drugs. But don't quote me. Like I said..."

It's something I can prove....

Ari smiled.

"Anyway, it's not just that. There's all the drinking--"

"And parties."

"You can tell they're all looped. Drunk." Fear and envy soaked Howie's analysis.

"And the Riggenses...?"

"Sure they partied, but not like that. And most of them were like social events.

They had good people over. Well, city officials. Even the deputy mayor, once." Howie lowered his voice. "A lot of blacks."

He choked up, suddenly realizing that in some quarters Ari might be considered a person of color. Ari pretended not to notice.

"Did they ever attend the Mackenzie parties?"

Howie was stumped. "I don't have a clue. Maybe they did. I was surprised Jerry didn't volunteer for the Neighborhood Watch--if just for appearance's sake. Maybe he didn't want to end up calling the police down on one of their loud parties. He'd never get invited back."

So the Mackenzie's weren't the only ones with a low opinion of the civic hoopla surrounding Jerry and Moria. Yet Howie's interpretation varied from Matt and Tracy's sour view of the accolades bestowed on their neighbors. Some manifestations of hypocrisy were more acceptable than others, and Howie did not think the Riggenses had been too outrageous on that score. In fact, he was remarkably sedate about it, if what Ari was thinking turned out to be true.

"You never went to one of their parties?"

"At the Mackenzies? Wouldn't have gone if I was invited."

"Yes, Matt smokes cigarettes."

Howie had already noted the bulge in Ari's shirt pocket and prudently refrained from comment.

"Matt Mackenzie seems to think there was a disturbance at the Riggins house some hours before the murders."

The silence regarding cigarettes carried over to the new topic.

"They both say they heard Jerry having some kind of fit, that he was slamming something."

Howie's head slid sideways, as though his thoughts had become unhinged. "They probably hear pink elephants stomping on their gardenias, too."

"You didn't hear anything?"

"No."

"But you were here that day?"

"Yes. I think I told you that before." Howie's eyes narrowed. "You're really curious about this?"

"I'm pestering you," Ari apologized.

"Well, it's going to take me the rest of the morning to do these logs."

"Of course." Ari made a show of suddenly remembering why he had come here.

"Oh...if it's possible, could I borrow your sledge hammer?"

Howie stared like a man dazed by a hit from a sledge hammer. "Why...?"

"There's a little job I need to perform. I could have it back to you in an hour."

With a nervous glance at the shed, Howie said, "I don't have one. Sorry. That was one of the things stolen before I locked everything up. I haven't gotten around to replacing it."

"Remarkable. They stole a sledge hammer, but not your expensive machine here?"

Howie shrugged. There was no explaining the criminal mind.

"When did this happen?"

"Last...over a year ago. Listen--"

"Of course." Ari turned away.

"Watch out for the flagpole base."

"I'm sorry?" Ari asked, a little surprised that Howie had jumped forward to escort him.

"I put up a flag a couple years ago. There was a stink about it."

"Was it an Iraqi flag?"

"Hell no! American, red, white and blue." Howie threw his arms out, as though shoving away any suggestion that it could be anything else. "But there was a HOA ordinance against flying *any* type of flag."

"HOA'? You mentioned that before."

"Homeowners' association. This one was set up in the mid-Seventies, long before I ever got here. They're supposed to make sure people treat their property responsibly, but this is crossing the line." He gave the base a kick. "It was a good, solid flagpole, too. Twenty feet high, white enamel on aluminum."

"But I've seen flags--"

"In other neighborhoods. Not this one. They say it detracts from the aesthetic value of the homes. Idiots. And there I am trying to protect them from the bad guys. Here..."

The base was formidable, a concrete slab with a metal slot in the middle for the pole. Ari couldn't imagine being so blind as to trip over it--unless one were actually blind.

"Won't be easy getting that sucker out.," Howie said, exhausted by the very idea of removing it. The man seemed to be preoccupied with destroying his own creations. Flags, woodpiles...what next? Would he be tearing down his shed because it was too vulnerable to break-ins? Howie continued: "Have to do it one day, though. Someone breaks a toe on it, I get sued. That's one thing you'll learn. Everyone here spends half their day suing someone about something."

One good thing about bombs and bullets: they take a tiny fraction of the time of a lawsuit.

"Did Jerry Riggins ever have any problems with this homeowners' association?"

"He wanted to build a pier at one time. They wouldn't let him. The association said this isn't a harbor community. He made a little bit of a fuss, but not much."

"Does the association have anything to say about the loud parties at the Mackenzies?"

"I wish it would! No, only if they left their trash laying everywhere the day after. But they always find a way to clean up their mess pretty quickly. If you keep your property clean, and keep your hedges clipped, and don't tack on any additions to your house or put up flagpoles, the charter doesn't much care what you do. Worthless."

A girl of about nine was strolling down Beach Court Lane, peering into the woods adjoining the river and calling out: "Marmaduke! Mar-ma-duuuke...!"

"Hello, Diane," Howie said, adding a curt wave. "He's run off again?"

"Hi, Mr. Nottoway." She was wearing a pink and green rumba dress, her bare legs flouncing the ruffled layers at her knees. Ari offered a minimal, neutral nod which she saw no need to respond to. Nor did Howie feel pressed to make introductions.

"I wouldn't worry too much about him," Howie told Diane. "He knows his way around."

"But he keeps going back to--"

"I'm sure he's in the woods hunting squirrels."

Diane appeared aware that her words had been rudely censored and instantly set off at a brisk clip. It looked to Ari like a well-practiced reaction to boorish adults.

"Marmaduke!"

Instead of hastening Ari's departure, Howie's intention now seemed to be to keep him at his side, at least until Diane was well away. But it was too late. Ari did not need to ask the girl for details about her missing pet. He now knew approximately where Sphinx had spent the last nine months...and that it was on the loose again. He did not know much about cats, except that they were marvelously unfaithful.

"Pets," Howie shook his head. "We have a dog. Not much for home defense. A pug something-or-other. But he'll wake the dead if a stranger comes in the house."

Ari got the impression that not many strangers entered Howie's home. Not many other people, either.

"I have geese," he said seriously.

"I..." Howie's confusion was distracted when he saw Ari staring at the flagpole base. "Don't get the wrong idea."

"Hmmm?"

"Just because they made me take down my flag doesn't mean I don't believe in my country anymore."

"I can see you're a good citizen," Ari said.

"This is still the best of the best. We got freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to you-name-it. It's an honest country. That word they use now...transparent. We're transparent. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. This is the best goddamn country in the world."

Ari gave his neighbor a straight, honest look. "I understand, Mr. Nottoway--"

"Howie," Nottoway cringed eagerly, as though being on a first-name basis was proof enough of his country's worth.

"Yes. Howie. Thank you. However, I must tell you that I...visited a land with one of the most repressive regimes imaginable, and do you know what the people there told me when I asked what they thought of their country?"

"What?"

"Exactly what you just told me now," said Ari.

At Lowe's, Ari placed a sledge hammer and bag of zip ties in his cart. He then approached a clerk and asked which tool would serve best to cut into an air duct—and experienced his first real sense of cultural dislocation since his arrival in this country. Everything up to now could be equated with something in his homeland. His ignorance of how to purchase and prepare basic food had been just as profound before, when a servant or his wife cooked his meals, or when he could pick up something familiar ready-made at a kiosk. Even Howie's HOA had a parallel, though his own community

association had had much harsher penalties and methods of enforcement. As for the shoot-out in the grocery store...well, violence was everywhere. But when the Lowe's clerk casually asked him if his house was old and used tin in its HVAC ductwork, or if it was relatively new and used galvanized steel, or if he had polyurethane foam panels, or fiberglass duct boards, and would he be cutting near a flex, or zone dampers, or the stack head, or the stack boot...Ari felt the same sinking in his gut that affected a million other would-be do-it-yourselfers every day.

"It would help if I knew what you intended to do," the clerk continued helpfully. Ari's obvious bemusement prompted him to add, "You might want to call in a contractor."

"Actually, it's a very minor problem," Ari said. "My son dropped something into the duct and I want to get it out."

"Oh wow, he lifted the floor register?"

"Actually, it was near the ceiling."

"What, he climbed a ladder?"

"The little devil is quite nimble."

"If it's small I wouldn't worry about it."

"It's actually fairly large," Ari thought quickly. "A toy truck."

"Double wow! A Tonka? Remind me never to have kids!" The young clerk spotted a coworker and called him over, repeating what he had just heard. The coworker, older, scrutinized Ari through his thick glasses.

"How old is your boy?"

"Five."

“Mmmm...big enough to cause trouble.” The older man paused. “You really want to go to all that bother? I mean, we could sell you a pair of snips, but some of that old tin is hard to cut—if it is tin, that is. Either way, you’d have to cut a hole first. Malco makes a good cutter. You attach it to your power drill. Kinda pricey.”

“I’ve seen people use a jigsaw,” the young clerk offered.

The older clerk laughed with horror. “A jigsaw on sheet metal duct? Up and down like that?” He rubbed his chin. “You might try an angle grinder. Or a Robosaw with a bit for metal. Bottom line, though, is do you know where this truck ended up? Is it caught at an angle? Or on a damper? Did it go down to the basement? You weren’t there when it happened? You didn’t hear it land?”

Ari shook his head in mortification.

“Get a professional. They got these things now, motorized brushes with video cameras.”

“Rotobrush,” said the young clerk.

“That’s it.”

Seeing Ari’s reluctance, the older clerk said, “You might just want to swing a hook down the register and see if you can catch it. Attach a little magnet and it might work itself over to the toy. You might get lucky.”

“I see...”

“Run your air and see if you hear a rattle, first.”

Ari added fifty feet of vinyl rope, a refrigerator post-it magnet and bungee cord hooks to his basket.

There were no ash trays to be had.

He was annoyed that his handlers could see his credit card purchases, but comforted by the confusion those purchases were sure to cause. Still, he would need cash, and soon, if for no other reason than that many ethnic stores did not accept plastic. His taste buds were crying out for proper food.

By noon he was at the Wal-Mart across the parking lot from the hardware store. He spent about ten hopeless minutes in the Food Center before surrendering to his inadequacy as a cook and going off in search of an ash tray. He was in the Home Décor department when a woman came up behind him and gave him a painful bump on the Achilles tendon with the undercarriage of her shopping cart. He turned, frowning. The petite blonde he had met briefly at the Foxfire Gallery made a dramatic show of contrition.

"Aw gee, sorry sir!"

"I believe the appropriate response in America is, 'sorry my ass'," Ari fumed, reaching down and rubbing his ankle.

"Don't make it so obvious," the woman said. "I didn't hit you that hard."

Ari grunted.

"We need to sit down and talk, anyway," the woman said. "There's a McDonald's in the back. It's lunch time. I'm starving."

Ari glanced in her cart and noted a large bag of Fritos.

"What do I call you?" he asked as he limped behind.

"Sandra," she said over her shoulder.

"'Agent' Sandra?"

"'Deputy', and shut up."

"Pleased to meet you, Deputy Sandra Shut Up."

She gave him an arch look. "Don't mistake this for the beginning of one of those love-hate romances you see in the movies."

"Of course not. My wife would never approve."

Sandra was parking her cart next to the rail that divided the restaurant from the store. She paused, frowning. "They didn't tell us..."

"I assumed you knew all about me."

"Not as much as we'd like to."

"We'?"

"United States Marshals Service," Sandra whispered so low Ari almost missed her answer. "So we should expect her to arrive to join the fun? And your family, too?"

"The house you gave me could hold several families."

"A regular fuck hutch."

"My family will not be arriving," said Ari, allowing his disapproval to show through. "They were sent somewhere else."

"Well that's good, because we only made arrangements for you."

Ari was sorry she chose this tone. From the laugh lines around her eyes he imagined she was normally a cheerful woman, full of sparkling energy. Her unhappiness with her assignment was disturbing. She chewed on her gum as though she were gnawing through skin. How much did she know about him? Could she be trusted? Could he really put his life in her hands?

Sandra bit off her next words when a noisy family piled onto a table next to the rail. A real feeding frenzy, with both kids and parents throwing off sandwich wrappers

and squashing food in their faces before they had properly opened their mouths. Ari held a brief image of an American brigade commander mocking a group of starving children churning their way through a refuse heap.

Ari stepped aside from the opening in the railing to allow Sandra through.

"You're not going to make me walk ten feet behind you? I'd like to see you try."

There were several people ahead in line. While Sandra fidgeted, Ari tried to make sense of the glowing overhead menu. So much of it was Mac-this and Mac-that. All except the tea, which was crystal clear: iced.

Sandra shot ahead to the counter, gave her order, and paid. She glanced at Ari. He gave way to the people behind him.

"I want to think about it a bit," he told her.

"Not kosher enough for you?"

"I think the word you want is 'Halal'. But I'm not a strict observer."

Sandra collected her burger, fries and drink and they went to a corner table. Ari found the plastic seats amusingly uncomfortable, almost like the bucket seat of an Asad Babil battle tank.

"What's that?" he inquired politely as she parted the wrapper in neat triangles around her sandwich. The formality contrasted bleakly with the wad of gum that she propped on the end of her tray.

"Big Mac. Top of the line heart-stopper. You should try it."

"There's no need to be unpleasant, Miss Sandra."

"Miss Sandra!" A fragment of bun shot out across the table as she snorted.

"How else should I address you if I want to be courteous?"

"Drop the courtesy," she said simply. "And give me one good reason why I shouldn't be unpleasant."

Ari leaned back in his chair as much as he could and rested one hand on the edge of the table. Sandra nodded at his ring finger.

"Where's the wedding band?"

"I believe it's in a box somewhere in the Green Zone, along with some other personal effects of mine."

"Uh-huh. Very convenient."

"How is that?"

"Guy like you, the great Abdul of Arabia. Bet the girls can't get enough of your shish kabob."

"Sandra...you asked me to meet you. If it's your intent to insult me--"

"Oh, chill out. A skuzzy Iraqi cop can't be hurt by a few words."

"I see..." Ari watched her snarl down her sandwich for a moment, then stood and got back into line. He placed his order and paid with his credit card. By the time he returned to the table, Sandra was three-fourths of the way through her sandwich, fries and Coke, which she consumed in compulsively even proportions. Ari took a sip of his coffee, found it adequate, and opened his sandwich box.

"Hey!" Sandra practically shouted as Ari lifted it to his mouth. He paused.

"Yes?"

"That's a sausage biscuit!"

"That's what I purchased."

"But it's pork!"

Ari smiled. "I'm gratified by your concern for my soul." He took a large bite.
"This year's Ramadan has begun. I shouldn't be eating at all. Not in daylight."

"Jesus, aren't you Muslim?" Sandra asked, her eyes wide.

Ari dabbed his lips with a paper napkin. "Sandra, would you be so kind as to say the following: I declare that there is no God but only One Allah, and I declare that Mohammad is the prophet of Allah (Peace be upon Him)."

"Why?"

"Indulge me. I believe that's why you're here, isn't it? Your superiors want you to humor me. Am I correct?"

"Not *my* superiors." She absent-mindedly bit down on a fry and murmured,
"*Their* superiors."

"Well?"

"I declare that there is no God but only One Allah, and I declare that Mohammad is the prophet of Allah."

"Peace be upon Him."

"Yeah, and that. There. Happy?"

"Very much so," he said. "You are now a Muslim."

"Bullshit."

"I'm perfectly serious. You've just spoken the Shahadatain, the Islamic declaration of faith. As soon as it passed your lips, you became one of the Faithful."

"That's ridiculous." Sandra turned beet red. No one enjoyed being caught in a cultural bear trap.

Ari stared at her for a moment, then took another bite out his sausage biscuit.

"I've heard of lapsed Catholics..." Sandra's animosity seemed to have deflated, at least for the moment. "They used to burn them at the stake."

"Every religion has its heretics." Ari observed. "The degree of heresy is judged by the strength of the faith of those around them. From what I can gather, heresy in America is almost nonexistent."

"We have faith," Sandra said testily.

"Enough to burn unbelievers alive?"

"Of course not."

"Then you have no faith."

"We have faith in democracy."

Ari stared at Sandra's three-fourths-eaten carton of fries. He had finished his biscuit but was still hungry.

"Your boss..." Ari paused. "Your *boss's* boss..."

"Homeland Security," Sandra muttered. "But getting back to faith..."

"Democracy, your secular religion, which is completely at odds with freedom, also your religion. You combine socialism and communism the same way."

"We have faith in both--freedom and democracy I mean."

Ari smiled. "If I pressed you, I believe you would amend that to 'freedom of opportunity'. Which conflicts with your third religion: equality. You're a college graduate?"

"UVA."

"A good school, I'm sure. And your degree practically guarantees you a better income than those who haven't had the same opportunity. Which in a capitalistic society

puts you in a higher social ranking."

"Forget I asked," Sandra said listlessly, losing interest.

"Of course. Now that you're one of the Faithful, you wouldn't be interested in a discourse on Western political philosophy. But as a good Muslim, you should be outraged that America is trying to impose its system of warring values on top of another system of warring values."

"I hope I'm humoring you adequately," said Sandra, plucking her wad of gum off her tray and popping it back into her mouth.

"Why Italian?" Ari asked abruptly.

"It's a good Mediterranean smorgasbord. "As soon as we saw your photograph, we realized you could play anything from Mexican to Mesopotamian. Sort of like Anthony Quinn. Sicily's a good halfway mark. And since you're fluent in Italian..."

"I see." Ari decided against ordering French fries and sipped at his coffee.

"You're here in response to my email?"

"I don't know about email. I just know that you made some demand about a file. It was passed along to my boss--completely out of Department of Justice channels."

"Are you the one who chose the Riggins house for me?"

The edge of Sandra's mouth curled up. "You don't like it?"

"I'm very impressed by your generosity."

"Don't be. The U.S. Marshals Service isn't paying. In fact, no government entity is paying. It's my understanding that this is all being funded out of Iraqi assets frozen before the war."

"So you could have purchased an even larger house for me."

"I'm budget-conscious," Sandra shrugged. "Besides, we got the house for a song."

"Because of what happened to the Riggins family."

"So? You don't like that? Does it give you the willies?"

"Quite the opposite. It has given me something to occupy my many idle moments."

Sandra nodded, disgusted with herself. "I didn't see that coming."

"You didn't see that a skuzzy Iraqi cop would become interested in the murder of an American family..."

"I figured you would shrug it off." She sucked at her Coke through a straw without interrupting her monotonous gum-chewing. "I'm sure you've seen worse."

Ari didn't answer.

"What is it you do for the U.S. that makes you so god-important? I've never done witness protection for a foreigner before."

"You don't know?" Ari said, a little surprised.

"We were told to find a place for you to live and protect you if you got into trouble."

"I haven't seen any security details."

"You won't need any if you keep your head low."

"Ah," Ari sighed, a tacit admission that he had not done very well in that department. But Sandra seemed oblivious to his numerous *faux pas*, from peeing in the park to killing three men in a Chinese market. "Your mandate said nothing about comfort, I presume."

"Meaning?"

"No furniture, no television, a primitive cell phone, my computer and purchases monitored..."

"Blame that last bit on Homeland. I don't think they trust you a whole lot."

"And the furniture?"

"You have an expense account," Sandra reasoned. "You want wicker or box furniture, go for it."

"What I want is the file on the Riggins case."

"We don't have jurisdiction over the RPD."

"The Richmond police were at the house only the other night."

"Why?" Sandra asked, her face going hard.

"They performed a rather gruesome walk-through of the premises, showed me exactly where the bodies were found, their condition, and various other details. It's my definite impression that they were sent to scare me away. Now why would they do that unless the house is still important to them?"

"Shit."

"So you see, either you move me out of that house--in which case, you'll have to admit it was a mistake to put me there--or give me the material I'm requesting so that I can better defend myself against my defenders. You say you are budget-conscious. Which would be more economical?"

"Asshole," Sandra said in a low voice. Her hand circled the bottom of her cup. She swiveled it slowly, contemplating the beads of condensation on the table. "I tried to join up, you know."

Ari gave her a blank look.

"In the Army. The recruiter asked me what I wanted and I said boots-on-ground infantry. They turned me down...said I was too small. As hard-up as they are, and they turned me down."

Ari sized her up. He had seen some surprisingly small soldiers overseas, but it was true Sandra would have needed lifts to match them.

"I've taken down 300-pound men," Sandra said. Then, with a confessional demureness, added, "In training."

"You wanted to get at the enemy," Ari nodded.

"I wanted to be on the front line. Anyway, I ended up going to Justice."

"And now here you are," said Ari. "On the front line. I admire your dedication."

"Yeah, you can, can't you? Running away from your country, taking aid and comfort from the enemy, including bopping every woman in sight. That makes the guys on the firing line real happy, I'll bet. Having a camel jockey in bed with their wives."

"You seem to be obsessed with my sex life."

"I saw those women coming on to you at the gallery."

"I believe only two women approached me. One of them was you."

Sandra was worked up, her eyes glowing narrowly, her complexion a reactor of red. Ari had seen enough satellite television to know of the West's fixation with sex, including the satisfaction that was apparently due every woman. He found the notion alien and puerile. But was that what was happening here? Was Sandra taking out some kind of womanly frustration on him? It was perfect idiocy. Perfect self-absorption.

"You don't know how 9/11...you just don't know. And then we saw your people celebrating in the streets. Were you out there with them, 'Ari Ciminon'?" Sandra was

fidgiting in her seat.

"The World Trade Towers? Quite honestly, I only thought of it as another terrorist attack. We discussed how slipshod American security was. That was all. At the time, of course, we did not suspect you would be paying us a visit."

"But you were with them."

"I don't understand what you mean. I had some access to government intelligence. Saddam and bin Laden? They loathe each other. We had nothing to do--"

"But you were with them," Sandra insisted.

"Very well," Ari sighed.

"And then the great Baghdad super cop chickens out and comes running to Uncle Sam. All by himself, no family, no wife--"

Ari's arm shot out so fast the diners next to them didn't see what happened. He judged his action perfectly, snagging the gum out of Sandra's mouth before she could so much as flinch.

She gasped, placing a hand on either side of her jaw. "You hit me!" she hissed.

"I did nothing of the kind." With a look of disgust, Ari pressed the gum into his napkin and took up a second napkin to wipe off his hand. "This is an unsightly and perverse habit."

"How did you..." Sandra was astonished. His fingers had scarcely brushed her lips. "Is that how you shoved the mouth guard in before applying shock torture?"

"There was no need for dexterity at Abu Ghraib," Ari said. "If the prisoner bit off his tongue during electroconvulsive therapy, so be it. If the prisoner did not open his mouth for us, and we wanted it open, we broke it open for him."

Sandra forgot her seat was bolted down and attempted to pull away without standing.

"Those fuckers," she said, still keeping her voice low, still on the job--and part of the job was to not draw undue attention. "They didn't say a word about this to us. Not a peep. You should be in Gitmo. At the very least."

"Guantanamo's for peasants. Get me that file on the Riggins, Sandra."

"Go fuck yourself."

For a brief moment, Ari unveiled himself. Let her feel the invisible menace. Sandra fell silent, looked away, stood up slowly.

"I have not been humored, Sandra. Your people are awaiting vital information. I will not give it to them until I have that file. I will have it."

Sandra began to shake. She scurried by him and passed through the railing, leaving her shopping cart behind.

"*Baraka Allah,*" said Ari, sipping his coffee.

TWELVE

The Americans were wilting under the Iraqi sun, but the translator was suffocating. His olive-brown balaclava seemed to circulate an extra layer of heat between the fabric and his face--a regular convection oven. Ghaith felt he was breathing his own blood. He was crouched several yards away from the soldiers, a target for glances that varied from courteous nods to vacuous grins.

They were huddled in the narrow strip of shade provided by a HESCO barrier—oversized, reinforced garbage bags stuffed with rubble and piled up to form a stout defensive wall.

Captain Rodriguez and Lieutenant Pito emerged from the CP at the same moment Private Ropp was holding out a packet in Ghaith's direction and calling in sing-song:

"Hey Haji, you want four fingers of death?"

"Sergeant Mastin," Rodriguez said loudly enough for them all to hear, "Is that soldier trying to give that man pork?"

"It's beef, Sir!" Ropp jumped up, saluting. "It says so on the pack! They eat beef!"

Rodriguez did not seem to hear the explanation, or felt it was Ropp's attitude, and not the beef franks he was offering Ghaith, that deserved a deaf ear.

"I'm going to the TOC for the new grid. Read this squad the Keep-Off-the-Grass Riot Act, then get them and the rest of Blue Platoon ready."

The soldiers exchanged embarrassed glances. So...Rodriguez had learned their phrase for the weekly or bi-weekly or tri-weekly reminders Pito was compelled to give his

platoon, negative pep rallies that never failed to drain the men of pep. But Pito would have none of it. He nodded at Sergeant Mastin, whose face seemed to pucker.

Captain Rodriguez and Lieutenant Pito had walked out of earshot when Private First Class Tuckerson turned on Ropp. "So you're the rat fuck stealing the dogs out of the MRE's."

Ropp was temporarily saved by Sergeant Mastin, who called his squad together, then asked Ghaith to stand next to him.

"Okay, Haji here is our new interpreter," said Mastin, nodding at Ghaith. "You are to treat him with all the respect you show your weapons. Do not offend him in any way, or you fuckchops will answer to me. The contractors have stolen all the decent terps in this sector for their new cement plant, and unless I miss my guess we'll lose Haji to the tactical HUMINT team in short order. In the meantime, though, Haji has kindly accepted employment with us.

"It looks like we might do some FISHing this afternoon, so...if for any reason you have to enter a Shia mosque...and it better be a damn good reason, like you just saw Godzilla ducking for cover...there's a whole slew of don'ts for you to observe. Do not touch the following things: shrines, books or walls, mainly the western corner. If someone's praying, don't walk in front of him because that interferes with his god-signal and he'll have to start all over again, including performing something called wudu, which I think means 'hand-washing'—and you know how these people dote on cleanliness. Don't talk, and if you have to talk, whisper. Don't talk unless spoken to, which means Ali Babba first, you second. If that makes you dead, you must've talked out of turn. When you walk in a mosque, someone might offer you a cup of water, which is

guaranteed to contain Ebola and every other disease of the Near, Far and Middle East, Africa included. Take the cup, say 'shukran' to the guy, then hand it back. 'Shukran', incidentally, means 'thanks' in basic Moronese. Don't immediately pull out your antibacterial Handi-wipe to clean your hands. This might be misinterpreted. We do not find these folks disgusting, got that?

"All-purpose greeting: 'al-salamu 'alaykum'. All-purpose response: 'wa 'alaykum as-salam'. To indicate respect, put 'ostaath' in front of a man's name and 'ostaatha' in front of a woman's name. I highly recommend that you refrain from speaking to women at all. These are not regimental ground sheets or desert queens. You see a habeebatee, look the other way. I'm dead serious on this. Habeeb will kill you if look at his woman the wrong way, or for too long, or step on her shadow. I can't say I care about your sorry asses, but Ali Babba will kill the woman, too, and all for just you looking at her. You got appliance rags in your issue. Dump your wads in there, if you have to. We'll be getting a woman translator in here for today's fun. Let her do all the female talk.

"Don't use last names alone. This is considered a serious diss and Habeeb'll blow your dicktrap right off your face. Don't go off if an Iraqi doesn't look you in the eye. They don't get into eye-gazing hereabouts. You'll also see Iraqi men hugging and kissing and holding hands. That's just how they are...and I'll leave it at that. Also...the following words are totally unsat: dunecoon, sand nigger, towelhead, camel jockey, etcetera. Some of these people speak English, and they'll know what you're saying. Always use your right hand when giving or accepting anything. They don't know Charmin' around here. They use the left hand for hygiene. I know we've got some

southpaws here. Think twice before you twitch.

“Don’t show the soles of your feet. It’s a big insult. Don’t ask me why. Do not consume alcohol in public. Do not stick up your thumb...like so. This is like flipping the bird at home. And don’t flip the bird, either, because flipping the bird here is the same as there. Do not use your index finger to call someone over. Don’t use a finger to point, use the whole hand. Make that the right hand. Don’t talk to Iraqis with your hands in your pockets. Don’t cross your legs. Do not compliment an Iraqi on his lovely child—this attracts the Evil Eye. Do not ask an Iraqi not to smoke. Do not signal with your palms up.

“Try not to shoot any FIF’s. That’s Free Iraqi Forces. Yeah, I know it’s hard to believe we got any friends around here. Try not to shoot any ICDC’s from the Civilian Defense Corps, either. They might not exactly be friends, but they go with whoever pays them, and we’ve paid them. As a general rule, try not to shoot any pax who aren’t shooting or RPGing us.

“Got all that? Don’t raise your hand, Rossco, I didn’t ask for questions.”

“I was just wondering if in all this ‘don’t’ we have any ‘do’. I mean, if I pick my nose, do I start a world war?”

The squad was staring at Ghaith, as though expecting him to answer. He knew he spooked some of them with his anonymity, his bank-robber ski mask and probing silence.

“We’re going to broom down Al Qods Street,” Sergeant Mastin continued, ignoring Rossco. “S-2 says the Mahdi Army might try another attack on the district advisory council. I want every swinging dick back here in ten minutes. No sickcall rangers. It’s only 130 degrees Fahrenheit. CS and MO!”

“Hooah!”

As the men ran into the abandoned Al Thawra police barracks they had commandeered, Ghaith caught Mastin’s attention.

“Where is the female interpreter? The captain promised there would be one.”

Mastin had mentioned the possibility of ‘FISHing’, which was the soldiers’ informal acronym for ‘Fighting in Someone’s House’, which they used to replace the official ‘Fighting in Built-Up Areas’. The irony was that, while it was against U.S. Army policy to put women on the firing line, Arabic-speaking women soldiers were essential in house-to-house searches.

Sergeant Mastin looked at Ghaith with a face as stiff and uncommunicative as Ghaith’s balaclava. “Promises aren’t Army issue.”

It was a little after two when Ari returned from Wal-Mart and his first conversation since New York with anyone connected to his handlers. There must be large gaps in the U.S. Marshal Service's file on him, or else Sandra would have been far less charming. To an outsider, there seemed no improvement in America's security since 9/11. The vital agencies were still not communicating with each other. Optimists declared this a good thing. No one wanted yet another police state.

He lugged his new sledge hammer and other hardware store items into the living room and laid them out. He opened the front door, then studied the central air control in the hallway. One setting said 'Fan Only'. He turned this on. Mechanical life entered the house, air thrumming through its tin or steel or fiberglass ducts.

Going into the kitchen, Ari stripped to his shorts, then went downstairs,

pinpointed the spot in the basement directly under the living room, and sat on the cool floor. He closed his eyes and concentrated, though without any real hope that he would hear the signature tune he was seeking. Something soft would not rattle, and a solid object would need a jet blast to make its presence known. But he tried.

Every so often he would hear a knock. Once...twice.... Then it would stop. He scooted closer to the wall. He did not want to press his ear against the paneling, knowing his own heartbeat would interfere with his hearing. Finally, though, he tried that, too.

And heard distinctly something tap-tapping inside the ductwork. Could it be part of the normal mechanical digestion of an HVAC system? It sounded as though it was coming from overhead.

He returned upstairs and repeated the process, seating himself first in the center of the room, then slowly easing over to the wall beneath the overhead register. When he finally rested his ear against the cool painted sheet rock he again heard the rattle. Just as faint, and now it sounded as though it was coming from below. He stretched out along the bottom trim and held his breath. Just as he predicted, his heart thudded with annoying, if reassuring, persistence. The sound in the wall was almost tender, like the click and thump of the cook's rolling pin when she lifted it off the chapatti dough as she prepared the family's weekly Indian dinner. It almost matched what he was expecting....

He lay like that for fifteen minutes, almost dozing, allowing his near trancelike state to navigate his thoughts through the metallic (or fiberglass) caverns. And then he heard a soft thud that did not come from inside the wall. He opened his eyes.

"Ah, Sphinx, you yellow devil. I was expecting you. I have some nice fish..."

"What are you doing?"

Ari shot up into a seating position and swiveled around on his buttocks to face Louis Carrington.

Been expecting you too, Detective Sergeant.

"Pardon me, Captain..." Ari stood. "Let me put some clothes on."

He gave the wrong rank to sow a moment's consternation, allowing him time to gather his wits. Carrington hung back in the living room while Ari went into the kitchen and quickly donned his shirt and trousers.

"You're in pretty good shape," Carrington said when Ari returned to the front. "Are architects expected to work out every day?"

"It's not a requirement," Ari shrugged modestly. "Only a personal preference."

"I guess you can tell my preference is the opposite." Carrington's ratchety laughter echoed against the bare walls. "I'd eat a rat's ass if it was the last thing left on the menu."

Whatever the general state of Carrington's health, Ari would take care if he encountered him in a dark alley. He had entered the house so silently Ari had mistaken him for a cat.

"So what's all this?" Carrington cocked his head at the Lowe's paraphernalia. "I'dve thought a few decent chairs would have priority over a sledgehammer."

"I heard knocking in the wall," Ari said, striking the pose of a disappointed home-buyer. "At first I thought it was mice. I went to Lowe's for poison and an employee there suggested it might be some kind of louver in the heating unit that's come loose."

"Count on a Lowe's clerk not to know the difference between a rat and a flap." Carrington placed his index finger on the sledgehammer handle, which Ari had left

standing on its head. "I wouldn't go tearing down your walls over a little knocking. If you don't like traps or poison, get a cat. We got one. There isn't a week goes by he doesn't leave a bloody lump on our doorstep as a gift."

"A good working cat," said Ari approvingly. "Do you know where I can find one?"

"Keep your door open the way you had it, one'll show up soon enough."

Carrington took his finger away from the sledge hammer and tucked his thumbs in his waistband. A sign of qualified relief? "Looked to me like you were stripped down for action. Demolishing walls is a dirty business."

"I was thinking that myself. I think I'll let the professionals handle the job. The clerk mentioned something about a robot brush that they use to clean out these systems."

The thumbs popped out of Carrington's pants like broken springs. "It's rats, or mice. We got a real problem with that around here. My kids watch these computer-generated cartoons about rats. They think they're cute. They go bonkers whenever our cat tears one to shreds."

Ari had noticed Carrington's conversational wanderings at the restaurant. What was he trying to say now? That there was a cultural tendency to cutesify what they were unable to control? That his children were disillusioned by reality?

"I didn't know you had children," said Ari.

"That's not surprising. You don't know anything about me."

"Except that you're willing to eat a rat's ass."

Carrington laughed at Ari's bland delivery.

"Yeah, I got three sprats." He noticed Ari looking at him closely and judged he

was calculating his age. "I married late. Finally found myself a good woman. Real lucky, for a cop."

"Yes."

"Take my word for it, get a cat. Go to Petco. They got cats up for adoption. They've had their shots and been fixed. You could pick one up for a couple hundred."

"I suppose you're right."

"But what's this with the rope and zip ties and stuff?" Carrington ran an inquisitorial nose across the room.

"More useless purchases, it seems. Captain, would you like some tea?"

Carrington had a flashback to Ari's encounter with the waitress at the all-night diner. He grinned, then seemed to perform a silent howl. "'Sergeant', Mr. Ciminon. Just measly old Detective Sergeant."

"I beg your pardon."

"Don't think about it. No, I'm not a tea man, especially when it's straight from the kettle. You don't happen to have a Coke laying around? No? That's all right, I can suffer in silence."

"Would you like to sit?"

"Before I do, I guess I should advise you that you've become a person of interest-- to me, at least."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be." Carrington levered his thick arm around and massaged his lower back. "I think I'll take you up on that chair."

The detective was put out when he saw the ladderback chairs at the kitchen table.

"That's it? You've been here almost a week and that's all the furniture you've got?"

"My living room and bedroom suites will be arriving by train," Ari said.

"The Orient Express ain't what it used to be." Carrington settled in like a patient easing onto a wheelchair.

"I have whiskey."

"I didn't think you people drank spirits. Course, I don't know squat about what Italians...or Arab Italians...do or don't do. No beer? The hard stuff kills my stomach." Then the detective wafted the air as though erasing his words. "Forget it. I'm on duty."

"Then you're here to tell me why I've suddenly become so interesting?"

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Carrington pulled out a cell phone. Ari leaned forward in his chair.

"May I?"

Carrington handed it to him. "You've never seen a BlackBerry Smartphone?"

"I've never held one. It's much more than a phone, correct?"

"Just look at all the buttons."

Carrington held out his hand and Ari reluctantly handed the BlackBerry back to him. He watched closely as the detective slid open the back of the phone. With a bit of huffing, he took out a small plastic case containing a media card. He pushed the card into a slot inside of the BlackBerry, closed the phone, and fiddled with the buttons.

"I pulled something wild off the net. Get a load of this..."

He held up the BlackBerry so that Ari could see the LCD screen. Blank at first, then sound, then images.

People were shouting, crying, venting fear and confusion. Heads popped up in

front of the lens, then came a yell in Chinese, "Get out of the way!"

Someone's head bobbed to the left. Ari could see the first cash register and the entrance. A man taller than the storefront bulletin board was swooping outside, his back to the camera.

"No! No!"

Even from the BlackBerry's tiny speaker, Ari could recognize the grocery store manager's voice. It grew louder.

"No camera!"

The glass door closed, then suddenly opened again as Ari's fishmonger ran out after the man, the bundle with the fresh carp under his arm. Whoever was holding the phone had finally managed to steady his camera. The view of the man in the parking lot was only partially blocked by the fishmonger, the image only slightly skewed by the angle of the rain-streaked plate glass window. As the man began to turn to accept the bundle, a hand suddenly shot up before the lens. The image became a swirl of close-ups of feet and linoleum floor tiles.

"No!" the grocery manager finished emphatically before the tiny screen went blank.

Ari sat back.

"Well?" Carrington demanded.

"Is this the robbery attempt I heard about?" Ari stood and went to the sink. "It happened yesterday, correct?"

"That's you, isn't it?"

"Do you think it looks like me?"

"Damn straight."

Ari ran some water into a pot for tea. He didn't have a proper kettle. He set the pot on the stove.

"It's all over YouTube," Carrington went on. "'Daytime Ninja Saves Oriental Market'. What crap."

"Do you have a description of this man?"

"Not a pimple. Mr. Fuck must pull some weight with his customers."

"'Mr. Fuck'?" Ari asked.

"Don't give me that screwy look. That's what his name sounds like. He must've put a real scare in his little community. Those Chinese love to talk, *yin-yang-yin-yang*, but as soon as we get there all they do is yang our chain. 'No see' and 'no hear'. You never met a more clueless group in your life. I'd like to know what Fuck told them. Maybe he threatened to cut off their supply of fortune cookies."

The water began to boil. Ari placed his tea strainer in his coffee mug and allowed his drink to steep.

"This man in the picture...you think he's the one who did the shooting?"

"You know I do," Carrington scowled.

"Is he considered a criminal?"

"We'd like to talk to him. After all, he blew away three men, two of them armed. Maybe three armed men, if the gun he walked off with belonged to the third guy."

"Will this man be arrested?"

"He'll be questioned...then probably released." Ari lifted his hands--palms up--as though to display neatly packaged self-evidence. "He's a hero, after all. It's just that we'd

like to go through a few formalities."

"For appearances sake." Ari removed the tea steeper and brought his mug over to the table. "Forgive me, but Americans seem to be enraptured with 'appearance'."

"Name me one country that isn't," said Carrington.

"True, but here, there seems to be a total belief in the appearance. There's no culture of acceptance that what you see is illusion."

"You telling me those Muslim guys who blow themselves up don't believe in what they're doing?"

"I'm speaking of mainstream society." Ari sat across from Carrington and sipped almost daintily from his mug. "Those terrorists have...I think the phrase is 'bought into'...the themes of the prevalent culture."

"If they think everything's an illusion, why take it so seriously?" Carrington asked. "Why kill yourself and a dozen or a few thousand others?"

"To them, the illusion is the reality. Most of them don't believe they're actually dying."

"Oh yeah, Heaven and the virgins," Carrington mocked.

"The reason other countries are afraid of the United States is because you have an entire nation that has confused illusion with reality. And you have the means to destroy anyone who doesn't conform with that illusion. You haven't used it yet, unless we include Japan, but the fear is that one day you will grow annoyed and go beyond mere pinprick invasions..."

"Give me a break. You don't see us blowing ourselves up in a crowded marketplace." Carrington needed to keep his hands busy. He fiddled with the

BlackBerry.

"You're rich. You can afford to do it by proxy. If we ever invade your country--"

"The Italians!" Carrington grinned.

"Anyone. If you see foreign soldiers on your streets, I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Jones will start strapping on suicide belts."

Carrington half-intentionally hit the Play button on the BlackBerry. Again they heard the chaos in the Chinese grocery.

"Here's an illusion for you. I see a quarter profile of a man in a parking lot, and I see you. The Chinese see the whole man, and they see nothing. I think you should be the center of attention, and you say there's nothing to it."

"It's no illusion," said Ari. "The man is there. This is solid evidence. You've only reached the wrong conclusion. Have the two officers who came to my house seen this?"

"Yeah. They're not sure."

"And they're familiar with my appearance," Ari said sympathetically. "So I ask, what makes you so sure--"

"For one thing, I smell fish."

"You mean something is 'fishy'?"

"That, too. You mind...?" Carrington glanced around. "Where do you keep your garbage?"

"Under the sink."

Carrington opened the cabinet, where a trash can with a plastic liner was hooked to the cabinet door--one of the few amenities provided by Sandra and her people. The

detective opened the flap and saw the white wrapping paper.

"Whew! Fish smell sure as hell lingers."

Ari parsed this sentence and found it vastly entertaining.

"The fish itself is in the refrigerator."

"You mind?" Carrington said again with monotonous certainty, as though the answer was forgone. He opened the refrigerator door and peeled back the aluminum foil in which Ari had wrapped his leftover fish. "What's that?"

"Carp."

"Kinda stinks." Carrington squinted, as though studying a wound. "Kinda boney, too. I notice you only ate half. You plan to finish it off? I wouldn't toss it outside. You don't want scavengers around the house."

"Like stray cats?"

"Or raccoons and possums. Get foxes around here, too." Carrington closed the door. "Yeah...Mangioni and Jackson said you were cooking fish when they showed up. You didn't get this out of the James, did you?"

"I've done some fishing in my day."

"But not yesterday. Unless you've already gone to Game and Inland Fisheries to get your license."

Ari was startled. You might get shot on the riverbank of the Tigris, might even hook a corpse, but you didn't need a license.

Carrington leveled an earnest look at Ari. "I saw a couple of Arab-type women at the Chinese shop and they had fish wrapped just the same way, with the same kind of paper."

"I bought the fish at Ali's in the Fan," said Ari, praying Ali sold fish as well as Halal meat. He had yet to visit the shop. He still wasn't sure where the Fan was, although he suspected it was just across the river.

"You know I'll check."

"Please do," Ari bluffed.

Carrington shuffled around the kitchen, giving the chair a wide berth. He rubbed his back.

"I'm sorry," said Ari, "but this is the best seat in the house, except for an office chair upstairs."

"Surprised you haven't set up a tent," Carrington said. He nodded toward the living room. "So what's with the sledgehammer? Howie said you were trying to borrow one from him this morning. And don't tell me you're searching for mice. I don't blame you for not thinking of a better story, what with me catching you in your underwear and all."

So he had talked to Howie. Precisely what Ari had been hoping, although he had not counted on the cell phone video.

"I'm...looking into something," Ari said carefully.

"Like trying to find a hiding place for a gun? The two stiffs at the shop had Tec-9's. You wouldn't be trying to knock a hole in your wall for an automatic pistol, would you, Mr. Ciminon? Something like that *would* get you arrested."

"Do you know that drugs are being sold on the riverfront here, detective?"

Carrington went over to the small kitchen window and peered out, as if studying Howie Nottoway's house through the trees. "What did you see?" he said after a long

moment.

"Do you know?"

"Yes."

"And your police department has done nothing about it?"

"We're working on it," Carrington answered grudgingly.

"Yes?"

"You're talking about the Kayak Express, I guess."

"They operate out of a kayak, yes."

"You've seen them in operation?"

Did Ari want to drag the Mackenzies into this? He personally did not care how people destroyed themselves. He was more concerned for the small farmers in Afghanistan, Columbia and elsewhere who got caught up in the cartel wars and deadly local battles over turf. And the middlemen were equally victimized, in most cases. Whether they were brutalized by the Taliban or getting beheaded in a fight over the drug trade traffic on the Mexican border, the distributors ran the ultimate risk. All for the morbid, mind-sucking European and American markets. For dreary, self-indulgent consumers like the Mackenzies....

And who else?

Ari decided against showing his cards. Besides, Carrington probably knew about the Mackenzies already. And he had no clue how deeply the police themselves were involved. Ari had hands-on experience with corruption.

"I've heard rumors about it," he said flatly.

"What, from Howie?"

"He's the leader of the Neighborhood Watch program in this area?" Ari said with a flex of inquiry.

"Yes."

"Then who better? But no...it wasn't Howie."

"And you don't intend to tell me who's spreading rumors around here?"

Ari wondered if he had made a misstep. If he could offer no reasonable source for his information, Carrington would feel he had been tricked into revealing the existence of the Express. If he said it was Howie, he would antagonize a key witness to the murders--of that Ari was now fairly certain.

"A couple of nights ago, around midnight, several small rockets were fired from the island just across from here. You can see it clearly during the day from the living room window."

"Yeah...?"

"I saw a kayak come close to shore, and then another boat came down the river and drew up next to it. I saw the men...I believe they were men...exchange something. Money and drugs? I can't say, of course. But it looked suspicious."

"You've got some bodacious eyes on you, buddy."

"Twenty-twenty," Ari said modestly.

"With Starlight scope," Carrington said, seemingly both doubtful and relieved.

"Well...that's the Kayak Express for you. Gives a whole new look on outdoor activities. We've been watching them..."

Ari saw Carrington's mind work. He was calculating time frames. Was he making certain Ari did not think the Express existed while the Riggins were in residence?

"...for a few months now. Problem is, if we catch them on the water, they just drop the stash overboard and we've got nada. And we don't know yet where their land operation is. Or their Mr. Big." He glanced at Ari.

"I'm familiar with the phrase."

"Then you must understand that we'd rather chop off the head than the limbs."

"Of course. It takes time." Ari summoned his most ingratiating smile. "I can tell you're preoccupied, Sergeant Carrington. Would you like to begin your search immediately?"

"Mmmm?"

"For the gun you think I walked off with yesterday."

"You wouldn't be put out?" Carrington said. "I don't want to be a pest."

"The Riggins house is your house."

Carrington's thick eyebrows shot up. "It's your house now, Mr. Ciminon."

"The invitation applies equally." Ari stood and extended his arm, palm up.

"Please. Look around. It would disturb me if you left here filled with doubts."

"You don't have an accent, but you sound funny as hell."

"How do I sound?"

"Like a butler on Masterpiece Theater." He held up a finger. "If you don't mind, I'll start in here."

"Certainly."

He went through the kitchen cabinets, most of which were completely bare, and those that weren't held only a few dishes and mugs. He went to the lower cabinets. Those were completely empty.

"You're going to need a sponge and scrub pad."

"I'll bear that in mind."

Carrington flipped open the dishwasher, oven and microwave.

"Are drugs a big problem in the city?" Ari asked while Carrington, with a series of heroic gasps and grunts, went down on his hands and knees and opened the bottom access panel on the dishwasher, checking the space with the aid of a penlight.

"Does shit stink?" Carrington said.

"And on the Southside?"

"It's part of the city." The detective paused to catch his breath, then worked his way to his feet. He spotted the box in the hall leading to the garage. "What's that?"

"Kitty litter. The kitty ran away."

"Song and dance, song and dance..." Without bothering to expand on this, he went into the living room and stared at Ari's paraphernalia. "Rope, zip ties, sledgehammer..." He brooded, as though trying to unravel an arcane mathematical formula. "Is your car locked?" he asked abruptly.

Ari reached into his pocket and, without taking it out, pressed three times on the remote. There was a beep from the garage. "Now it is."

Ari followed him out. The Scion was not congenial to Carrington's endomorphic body type, but he managed to work his way over the seats and through the trunk with only a modest flood of sweat.

"Is there a drug problem in this neighborhood?"

"Still the city."

After a quick look around the bare garage, Carrington led the way back inside and

paused in front of the living room fireplace.

"Was Jerry Riggins a happy man? You knew him well, I believe."

"He was the happiest," said Carrington, staring into the empty hearth.

"And his family?"

"Even happier."

"Why was Jerry sitting alone at midnight in this room when he was murdered?"

"Maybe he was watching Leno."

"There was no television in the diagram of this room."

"You mean what the papers put out?" Carrington barked, as though that in itself provided an explanation.

"Yes, your two policemen seem to think there were some inaccuracies."

"Mangioni and Jackson..." Carrington said, giving Ari a cagey look. "I hope they got as much out of you as you got out of them."

Carrington passed through the foyer without giving the small access door to the outdoor water control a glance. That would have provided an excellent hiding place for a gun--as Ari believed it once already had. That smell on his fingers...he was now convinced it was gun oil.

Carrington trudged downstairs and made a wide turn around the bare rec room. He checked out the water heater, listened to it hiss, then bossed around the washer and dryer. "At least you got electricity and hot water."

"Were the Rigginses happily married?"

Carrington's glance was all the more baleful under the harsh light of the utility room light bulb. "I said they were happy. That means they were happy with each other,

too. And they loved their kids."

"But there seems to have been a fight between them the day of the murders."

"Where the fuck did you hear that?"

"And some loud banging."

"Where the fuck did you hear that?" Carrington repeated.

"It's common knowledge around here," Ari lied brazenly.

"Mr. Ciminon, try not to be a pain in the ass. If you did what I think you did at the Chinese market, you deserve a medal. But that'll only get you so far. We've got Medal of Honor winners serving life terms in prison."

Ari followed the detective upstairs, where he again paused in front of the fireplace, as if that was his base of operations.

"All these questions about a sledgehammer and if Jerry owned a gun..."

"I'm only trying to understand--"

"Who are you?" Carrington asked abruptly.

"Who you see," Ari answered simply.

They went to the second floor, Carrington straining at each step. In the studio, Carrington stared at Ari's primitive sleeping arrangements. "Okay, you're a gypsy. Maybe I better check with the real estate agency to make sure you belong here."

"Alas," said Ari.

"You don't sound happy to be in a swell house like this."

"With all this knocking in the wall?"

"Ha!" Carrington nudged the inflatable mattress with his foot. There were no unusual bumps or lumps. He gave the computer a cursory glance.

Like Mangioni and Jackson, like Ari himself, Carrington found it painful to enter the boys' bedrooms. He checked the closets and quickly left.

"Ah," he said when opened the hallway linen closet. "You've actually got something here." Carrington ruffled through the handful of towels and wash cloths. He went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet.

"Do you think a gun would fit in there?" Ari asked.

"Never know. You're not much into drugs yourself, are you Mr. Ciminon? Not even a bottle of aspirin. No mouthwash, either." He checked the cabinets beneath the sink.

They went into the master bedroom. Ari walked over to the window. "Could Mrs. Riggins have been staring out at the river before she was killed? Was she waiting for something?"

"She was asleep," said Carrington flatly, as though reading the words off a police report--just like Officer Jackson.

"And the noise at the back door didn't wake her..."

"What are you getting at?"

"Isn't it possible that the back door was smashed in earlier? Around five o'clock? That's when the Mackenzies heard a loud slamming over here. They heard a dispute--"

"That pair doesn't know their ass-joint from their elbow-hole."

"That's possible. But it would explain why no one woke up. The door was already broken."

"Right," Carrington fumed. "And then the killers waltzed around the house for seven hours before killing the family."

"Have you checked the phone records? They might have called for help if--"

"Okay, no gun." Carrington slammed the bedroom closet door shut. "At least, no gun in the house. I think I'm finished here."

"That's just as well," said Ari, glancing at his watch. "I have a date."

"Great. You get laid, maybe you'll stop acting so screwy. But I wouldn't bring a lady here. No lady I know likes an empty house." Carrington smirked. "Empty, except for the ghosts."

THIRTEEN

"You don't know how lucky you are," Ropp told Ghaith, as though letting him in on a secret. "Those SF's up ahead are in a swish Land Cruiser. A Land Cruiser! Some kid comes along and throws a rock, that coffin'll roll over."

"Don't dump on the civilian," Tuckerson shouted over the roar of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. He leaned over to Ghaith. "The Land Cruiser's MDT up-armored. It can take a pair of M67's and no one inside gets hurt."

"Grenades!" Ropp laughed harshly. The man seated next to him on the bench overheard and began to jump up. When he realized Ropp had shouted the word in a normal conversation he punched him in the shoulder.

"Like I was saying," Ropp continued, rumpling the blouse of his DCU as he rubbed his sore arm, "even an up-armored Land Cruiser doesn't stand much chance. And these Humvees behind us aren't much better, with their hillbilly armor. But a Brad, you gotta love it."

"Ali Babba knocked out an M-1 across the river last week," Tuckerson said. "And the turret alone of an Abrams outweighs a Bradley by--"

"Thanks for reminding us," Ropp said, commandeering the remaining five men in back for his scorn.

"Point is, nobody's safe, no matter what. Everyone gets donked when their time comes."

Ghaith nodded understandingly. He didn't smile. He didn't want to look like a village idiot.

Every so often they could hear grunts from the turret as Staff Sergeant Henley leaned forward to raise a power line with a long wooden pole. Several soldiers had been electrocuted before the BC's learned not to lift the lines out of the way with bare hands.

"Anyone know where we're going?" the man next to Ropp shouted.

This broke the squad up. Like they were supposed to know where they were going. Who was he kidding? This was the U.S. Army!

"Weren't you listening to the Top?" said Ropp. "Al Qods Street...the Mahdi Army..."

"That's it? We don't know nothing else?"

The squad broke up again. This guy was serious. He really wanted answers!

"There were some Q36 hits last night that your battalion commander wants investigated," said Ghaith.

The laughing stopped instantly. The men stared at Ghaith.

"How do you now that?" Ropp demanded.

"Your captain told me," Ghaith said, judging this was the time to smile.

"You and not us?" Ropp said skeptically.

Ghaith was telling the truth, but felt obliged not to give the reason: that Captain Rodriguez had called him over while he was conferring with two of his platoon commanders in order to get Ghaith away from 'those goons', as the captain put it. Then he had turned his back on the interpreter and spoken as if Ghaith was not there. As if he was not convinced Ghaith could speak English.

"TF-1 was supposed to check out the grid yesterday," Rodriguez had told the two lieutenants, showing them a printout. "They got detoured, so now the colonel wants us

to go in."

"The tubes will be long gone, sir," said one lieutenant doubtfully.

"You never know. They start hitting the FOB again and we haven't looked..."

"Yes, Sir."

"Crap, that's Sadr City, sir," said the other lieutenant.

"Yeah. I hate these Mahdi assholes who fire into a crowded city blind. They don't give a shit who they hit. And I can't lay the fist of God on them."

"Well, we could--"

"Flatten a city block? What would 60 Minutes make of that? And the real reason we're going out isn't the Q36 grid. I've got 5,000 in greenbacks, and 50,000 dinars for anyone who doesn't think the dollar's almighty, all for the hearts and minds and pockets of those shopkeepers we put out of business last week."

"You mean those buildings--"

"But those were high-value targets," the other lieutenant protested.

"Tell it to Dan Rather." Rodriguez's face went grimmer still. "And watch us end up flattening another mom and pop while we're paying for these. I hate this MOUT crap. Give me one of the provinces, where I can cut loose with the counterfire. If we could fire up Baghdad with white phosphorus, we'd see some improvement." He looked at Ghaith, obviously wondering how much he had understood.

Some, but not everything. The U.S. Army's love affair with acronyms put a haze over everyday operations. No doubt a bloody, godawful mess sounded better when it was referred to as a BGM. But to Ghaith's thinking, the intensive use of acronyms was, in addition to being deceptive, hugely counterproductive. He had no idea what MOUT

meant. It might be important, but how would he know unless someone spelled it out for him?

"I was with the captain when he laid out the mission to his platoon leaders," Ghaith told Ropp and the others as the Bradley slowed for another of the power lines that drooped across the street.

"Hey, your English is all right." Tuckerson nodded his approval. "We've had some real goofballs, but you're A-OK, Haji."

The other squad members chimed in, also nodding. Ghaith thought they looked like a bunch of village idiots. But there was a charming sensibility to their reaction. English-speakers stranded in a linguistic desert, the interpreter offered the cup of communication with the locals. A good translator was worth his weight in gold. Ghaith wondered if he would live long enough to spend any of the \$500 the invading army had paid him to sign up.

The Bradley stopped. The driver asked...actually begged...for permission to open his hatch. Seated up next to the engine, which added its own cruel heat to the steady blast of the sun, the driver suffered more than anyone else in the vehicle. Ghaith had learned it was usually a new man assigned to the position. A hot introduction to the cradle of civilization. Ghaith also suffered from the heat. The balaclava was unbearable.

The ramp dropped and the squad debouched. They spread out while infantry from Humvees and Bradleys further down the column dragged themselves up the street to join them. In their impenetrable wraparounds, they looked like bug-eyed aliens. Sunglasses were good at hiding fear, Ghaith noted, but somehow emphasized boredom.

Captain Rodriguez removed his CVC helmet and replaced it with his K-pot. He pulled himself out of the turret and negotiated his way down the armored slope of the Bradley, past the numerous kits slung so thickly on its flank that the captain had complained about it looking like a gypsy wagon.

A group of Iraqi men ran up and immediately swamped the captain with unintelligible complaints. He removed his shades and glanced over at Ghaith, who went to his side. The men fell silent, as spooked by his mask as the Americans, but quickly recovered. There were five of them, and they all spoke at once. Ghaith held up his right hand, fingertips touching, and moved his hand up and down while bending his head. A request for patience.

"Tell them I'm here to compensate them for the incidental damage to their stores that we caused last week," said Rodriguez

The 'incidental' part lifted the message into a mildly abstract realm that could be time-consuming and futile, and was sure to raise plenty of shouts.

"We're here to give you money," he told the shopkeepers in Arabic.

The noise level went up anyway. The captain had attended a seven-week immersion course in Arabic, but only a little bit had stuck. He shot Ghaith a wary look.

"They must first produce the IOU's I gave them during our last...uh...visit...before I can compensate them."

There was no need for Ghaith to translate. They all understood 'IOU'. Five chits from the captain's receipt book immediately appeared.

Further up the line a group of men and children gathered around the woman translator sent down from battalion. She and some other soldiers were handing out

candy. But when the captain took out a waterproof pouch and unzipped it, a new crowd magically appeared, pushing forward.

"We need a hovering angel," the staff sergeant called down from the Bradley turret. He wanted someone on a rooftop for a better view of the street. This was a nice fat target for a suicide bomber.

"We shouldn't be here long," Rodriguez answered.

Ghaith was looking at the fifth shopkeeper. Abdul Ibrahim bin Omar al-Ahmad. Another one from the mass release of prisoners before the war. Convicted, more or less, of stabbing a man in a fight over a jar of spicy walnut spread. Had he really turned shopkeeper? Ghaith edged around the captain and approached the former prisoner. He would risk a few informal words. He had never met the man in person.

"Al-salamu 'alaykum, Abu Khalil."

Abdul Ibrahim turned his eager gaze away from Rodriguez and stared at the interpreter.

"Did you really run a shop here, or did you tear that IOU out of the owner's hand? I hope you didn't kill him to get it."

The other four men stopped shouting and turned to look. Rodriguez was startled. He had never seen the locals go quiet when there was money around. The only voices raised now came from the growing crowd of children that bubbled around the captain, as though he was the main course in a boiling pot. He signaled to Staff Sergeant Henley, who disappeared in the turret and reemerged with handfuls of jawbreakers. The kids shifted away from Rodriguez as the candy rained down from the Bradley.

"Ho-ho-ho!" Henley bellowed. A look of concern crossed the captain's face.

Could Santa's signature tune be misinterpreted?

"Hey, Abu Khalil," Ghaith continued, his dental work outlined by the balaclava's mouth slit. It was a sign of privilege, those fine teeth.

Former privilege. A privilege that was not only out of date, but dangerous. Like an antique car without brakes.

"Are you going to let these shopkeepers keep their money after we've gone?"

Ghaith gave Abdul Ibrahim a belated hug, and whispered into his ear. "You wouldn't cut their throats for a few measly dinars, would you?"

Rodriguez had taken out his flash roll and was trying to shove the compensation money on the shopkeepers, who seemed suddenly reluctant to accept it. A young boy jumped up, trying to snatch a bill out of the captain's hand.

"Hurry it up, whatever it is you're doing," he said fretfully to Ghaith, who had not let go of Abdul Ibrahim.

"If I hear that anything has happened to these brothers," Ghaith was whispering, "I'll track you down, cut off your manhood, and let the camels suck on your balls."

Abdul Ibrahim had begun to shake so violently that he had no strength to break away.

"The Godless One..."

Ghaith was not aware that he had a moniker. Perhaps Abdul Ibrahim was mistaking him for one of the prison guards who had tortured him. But he had a nickname now. And he smiled. It did not sit badly with him. Not at all.

On Riverside Drive Ari stopped and asked a jogger where the Fan was. He was

told he had only to drive up to Huguenot Road, turn left, cross the bridge, and keep going straight, past Windsor Farms and Carytown. While speaking, the jogger gave the Scion a narrow, jaundiced eye.

"Hey, aren't you the one who's been speeding through here--"

"Thank you," said Ari, and sped off.

The Shamrock turned out to be only four doors down from Ali's Mediterranean Market. There was a handwritten sign in the window that announced, "Yes We Have Halal." Halal meat and poultry had a reputation for quality that was usually well-deserved, and Ari was disappointed to find the shop closed. It didn't matter. While it would have been pleasant to pass some time browsing Ali's aisles, he did not want to miss happy hour.

Inside the Shamrock a waitress invited him to take any unoccupied seat he liked. Ari found this congenial and was immediately at ease. He slid onto a barstool and ordered tea. The bartender began wielding bottles of vodka, tequila, gin, rum and triple sec. Ari assumed he was fixing a drink for the man at the opposite end of the bar. First come first serve. When the bartender stood a tall glass in front of him, it took a certain amount of self-control to keep from gaping.

"What is this?"

"Long Island Tea. Isn't that what you wanted? Oh, here's the lemon slice."

Ari stared at the highball glass. "I'm still not used to drinking alcohol in public."

The bartender gave him a double-take, then tried to make light of the inference that Ari only drank in private, like all good alcoholics:

"I wouldn't have thought you drank at all."

It was intended to be a friendly observation and Ari took it in that spirit.

"I like a good whisky, just like my master."

This was nonsense to the bartender. But he was used to non sequiturs and shrugged it off. "You want something different?"

"That's all right." Ari handed over his credit card.

"There's a buffet against the wall there. There's...uh...some meatballs. I think there might be pork in them."

"Dreadful. Is it free?"

"Happy hour," said the bartender.

Wonderful. It must be one of the bonuses of being a super power.

Ari lifted the glass. Wafting it under his nose for a sniff might be gauche--this wasn't wine, after all. So he took a sip.

Sour. But not bad. Quite strong, though.

He eased back and ran his eyes over the booths, half of which were occupied. He went to the buffet and plopped a half dozen meatballs and some cheese cubes onto a Styrofoam plate, returned to the bar and began eating them with his fingers. The meat sauce was a bit messy. The bartender seemed relieved when he began using a toothpick.

Italian! What were Sandra and her idiotic crew thinking? There isn't a man on the street who doesn't see me for what I am. And oddly enough, all those men on the street are wrong. Maybe Sicilian wasn't a bad choice, after all. A dangerous Mafioso...

The two vampish employees of Moria's Notions had said Moria and Tina went to Andy's or the Shamrock on Tuesday and Friday evenings. Did Tina keep up the habit? Or had the death of her business partner--and presumably friend--put her out of sorts for

after-hours socializing?

Ari had a fifty-fifty chance of finding out that night. In fact, he admitted to himself, the odds were far longer than that. If Tina just happened to skip this Friday, or if Friday was the day she went to Andy's, or if she varied her routine, the odds grew longer by far. But Ari was familiar with luck in all forms, and knew the good could strike with the same ineffable certainty as the bad at any moment. Even then, it was open to interpretation. His presence at the Chinese grocery had been bad luck for Ari, very bad luck for the would-be robbers, and splendid luck indeed for the store manager.

Good luck struck for Ari twenty-five minutes after he entered the Shamrock. Bad luck struck for Tina Press at precisely the same moment, when Ari saw her walk languidly through the tavern door, nod knowingly at the waitress, and settle in at the booth nearest the entrance. She did not see him, well-hidden in the shadow of the overhead glass rack in a bar that was already dimly lit. He watched.

Unfortunately, if he went to the buffet she could not fail to spot him. The Long Island Tea had stirred up his appetite. He had to satisfy himself with pretzels from an oval dish near the speed rail.

"You want another?" the bartender asked when he had emptied his glass.

An immense glow filled Ari's limbs, as though he had stepped into a Jacuzzi. He had a long night ahead. "Do you have something...?"

"Unleaded?"

"I'm not sure..."

"How about Ginger ale?"

"Is that a Fanta?"

"Now I'm the one not sure..."

"A soda?"

"Well yeah."

"Then I'll have that."

It was a lot to pay for a soft drink, but the seat with the view came with it.

By his second Canada Dry he had seen enough. First a man, then a woman, then a couple came and sat with Tina, conversing with her and sharing a few laughs before departing. In between the hellos and good-byes some discreet commerce took place behind propped menus. Ari realized what he had in mind might prove more difficult than he had anticipated. The bar owner must be taking a cut from these transactions, which were not so furtive as to be invisible. Every fifteen minutes or so, the bartender handed the waitress a drink for Tina's table. She did not take advantage of the free buffet.

Ari took up his glass and sauntered over to the buffet. Tina might be satisfied with her liquid diet, but he was famished, even after six meatballs. He filled up a plate, then slid into the front booth, across from Tina.

"Hey," she said in a sultry voice before even looking at him.

"Good evening," Ari said, stabbing a meatball with his toothpick.

Her head shot up. She frowned and glanced over at the bartender, who stopped plying his dishtowel across the counter and leaned his forearms on the newly-cleaned wood. He was tall but thin. Either someone Ari had not seen provided the muscle around here, or he had some other means of establishing order.

"Problem, Tina?"

She turned back to Ari and worked on focusing her eyes. Her glass was small,

like a miniature champagne flute. Ari had watched the shuttle service between the bar and booth and knew she had had three of whatever it was she was drinking. It was obvious she depended upon the good will of the Shamrock staff to function.

"I know you..." she said.

"We met briefly yesterday morning, in front of your shop."

"Oh yeah...the French Twist."

"I'm sorry?"

"When you ran off in the rain, you yelled something in French. Something about being late for an appointment."

"Yes," Ari sighed. An appointment with a gunfight.

"Yeah..." She attempted a snarl, which misfired into a sad leer. Ari realized she was going to try to chase him off with attitude. The clock on the wall said 6:43. He could take his time.

"You're that wetback that bought Moria's house." Her face went gloomy with doubt. "I mean...you're that mick...no, wait...I'm sorry. Give me a minute.

No one had ever apologized to Ari for misapplying a racial epithet to him. He found the experience amusing, but did not smile.

"Spade...? Well, you look like half a spade." Tina rifled through her lexicon of the dark side, which seemed as paltry as the rest of her vocabulary. "Frog...guinea...spic! That's it! Spic! Or wait..."

It was amazing what a little lipstick could do. When Ari had seen her at the shop, she had been wearing a bright red gloss that animated her small face. But that irate liveliness now rested in a nest of red-smearred paper napkins at her elbow. She had been

dabbing at her lips as she drank, removing her personality bit by bit, until she was stone.

"I believe the phrase you are looking for is 'Italian of Arab descent'," Ari said.

"Don't tell me the Pope's gone PC."

"I have no idea." Ari finished his ginger ale.

A young couple who looked like clones of the Mackenzies entered the bar, hesitated uncertainly on seeing Tina sharing the booth with a stranger, and left. With her back to the door, Tina could not see them, but the bartender was obviously put out.

"You're still snooping around about the Riggins murders?" Tina said angrily.

"I'm quite curious--"

"Weren't you told to forget it?"

Not exactly. Carrington had done his best to make Ari uncomfortable. But for all the blunt hints, he had never come right out and told Ari to give up his personal investigation, or else.

"I only have a few questions--"

Tina smiled as the waitress came up to their table. "Marybelle..." Tina said with relief, as though she had just taken a shot from an oxygen mask.

"Ah," said Ari, scooting his empty glass to the edge. "Could I have another one of these?"

"Sir," said Marybelle, ignoring the glass. "This is a family restaurant. We don't want any trouble."

"Certainly. Neither do I."

"Then I'm going to have to ask you to stop disturbing this lady."

Tina flicked her brow and Marybelle became more emphatic.

"In fact, sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"And if I don't leave, and insist on continuing my lovely conversation with this lovely lady, will you call the police?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you don't really want to do that, do you?" Ari said. "They would be astonished to find out Tina has been dispensing non-prescription medication out of her little pharmacy here. That's an interesting handbag, by the way. Gucci?"

He had raised the discussion beyond discussion. Words now bordered on the meaningless, unless they could be backed by a viable threat.

Tina leaned forward, smirking. "Listen, Mr. What-the-Fuck, you'd better get your ass out of here. Marybelle is a black belt. She'll crack your spine for the marrow."

"Your language is unsightly," said Ari. He meant it.

"Sir," Marybelle persisted, taking a stance. Ari noticed she had excellent balance. She was wearing cropped jeans and a tied off blouse that exposed her finely toned ribs. He was impressed when she flexed her abdominal muscles.

"From what I've seen in American movies, I believe this is the moment I ask if you want to step outside."

"With pleasure, sir."

"You have, I believe, served in the armed forces?"

"*Hooah*, sir."

"It shows." Ari's hand shot out. He had Marybelle by the wrist. She gave a small shout of anger at being surprised. She moved forward to attack but this only helped Ari plant her hand on the table. He slid his thumb under her middle finger, using the rest of

his hand to hold her down. As she raised her other arm to strike, Ari lifted up on her trapped finger. She gave a small bark of pain.

"Please desist," Ari said pleasantly, adding a little more pressure when it seemed she wasn't listening.

Tina watched bug-eyed. The bartender had circled around with the first weapon that came into his hand: an ash tray. Ari warned him off by drawing another shout from Marybelle.

The bartender noticed customers staring at him. He smiled and began wiping out the ash tray with the edge of his small apron.

Ari kept his voice low. "Marybelle, listen carefully. Do you hear me? I have never broken a woman's arm before. I'm sure it would upset my digestion. Proper digestion is critical to good health, don't you agree?"

Marybelle was sweating, her nausea gathering. Ari hoped she would see reason quickly, or else her digestion would end up in his lap.

"Okay," she grimaced.

Ari let go. She stepped back, massaging her hand. Ari decided not to add insult to injury by insisting on a refill.

"Who are you?" Tina asked breathlessly as soon as Marybelle slunk away.

"You've heard of the Genovese family?"

"My God..." Tina pressed her spine against the bench. "What are you, some kind of hitman? Am I trespassing on someone's territory? You want a piece of the action?"

Ari briefly considered the offer. He was, after all, strapped for cash. But he decided this was not the best way to acquire it.

"I want nothing to do with your operation here," said Ari. "I am only a concerned citizen..." Ari paused. He wasn't exactly a citizen of this country. Not even a welcome guest, it seemed. "A concerned citizen of the world. Whoever killed that family is still on the loose. Bringing them to justice would benefit everyone."

"Not the killer," said Tina.

Singular...

"Did Jerry Riggins own a gun?"

"How the fuck should I--" Tina was not looking at him, but at the wall paneling. But she sensed his dissatisfaction with her. Even before he presented himself, as he watched from the barstool, he had seen her progressively wilt with each minute. It wasn't just the alcohol. She did not like the drug trade. Had she inherited it from Moria?

Shadows formed harsh pools under her eyes. She shook her head. "I don't know. But I think..."

"Yes?" Ari prodded.

"Moria said something about getting one. I was surprised. That wasn't like her."

"Was she afraid of someone?"

"Since you saw the business you must know the business," she scolded, as though to say he wasn't a very good spy.

"You're saying that the trade in little cellophane envelopes is dangerous?"

Tina brushed away several layers of alcohol haze, leaving behind about a dozen.

"I know what you're thinking, that this is what got Moria killed. But it isn't."

This settled one of Ari's questions very nicely. "How do you know?"

"Because I would have been told so."

"By Carrington?"

Tina had enough of her wits about her to shrug. "Anyway, everyone liked her. This...was nothing. Like giving a drink to a friend."

"Yes, I always make my friends pay for their drinks." Ari finished off his last meatball. Suddenly, a glass appeared in front of him.

"On the house."

"Why, thank you, Marybelle," said Ari, smiling up at the waitress. "That is most gracious of you."

Marybelle nodded and walked away. Tina tossed a skeptical glance at her protectress, then at the ginger ale.

"How long had you and Moria been entertaining your friends this way?"

"Not long."

Having encountered a wide swath of relativism since his arrival, Ari aimed for a more precise timescale. "'Not long' means what? Months? Years?"

"A few..."

"Years?"

She didn't answer.

"Did Jerry participate in this business?"

"Jerry was a wuss."

"Because he looked after the boys at home?"

"Because he really had faith in that garbage he painted and thought he was going somewhere."

"Meaning fame and fortune?"

"Meaning he thought he had the right to mooch off his wife and her folks. 'For the greater glory of garbage' and all that. Well he's raking it in, now...and look what he had to do to get there."

Ari found the choice of words curious. "What did he have to do?"

"He--" Tina caught herself. "He had to go and get killed," she said finally.

Ari gave her a nod of agreement. Yes, that seemed a bit extreme. "Tell me, why would Moria get involved in something like this? Not for the money. Wasn't she well-provided for by her parents?"

"People with money are even worse," said Tina, giving one of her short locks a violent tug.

"You mean she was in it for kicks?"

"Her father..."

"What about him?"

But Tina was wagging her finger at Marybelle. "Sugar, could you bring me another one of these?"

"Sure, Sugar," said the waitress, returning to the bar.

Tina took out a pack of Marlboros. "Mind?"

In response, Ari brought out his Winstons. A cloud of smoke soon boiled at the front of the bar.

"You know some of the customers are worried about second-hand smoke," Marybelle admonished Tina as she brought her drink.

Ari inferred from her tone that she was speaking of Tina's customers, not the usual clientele of the Shamrock family establishment--though of as yet Ari had seen no

children. The irony of health-conscious druggies was not lost on him.

"You see any customers?" Tina said querulously. "Until I finish with Sherlock here I think business will be nada."

Marybelle bit Ari's head off with a glance and went away. Perhaps she was sorry she had given him the ginger ale.

"What about Moria's father?"

"Millionaire. I know that's not much these days, but a million is still a big number in Richmond. He was an executive with an aluminum company. Moria called him the Tin Man."

"I'm sorry..."

"You know, from The Wizard of Oz. The most iconic movie in American history?"

"I must have missed that one," Ari confessed.

"You never heard of Dorothy or the Cowardly Lion or the Scarecrow?"

"Moria's father..."

"Talk about cultural deficiency. If you want to become a citizen, you've got to watch that movie." Tina sipped at her drink.

"I believe aluminum and tin are not the same thing."

Tina burst out laughing. Like most people, she was at her most attractive when she laughed. No need for lipstick. "Moria's father, Tom Massington...he had some issues. I don't know all the details, but a few years ago he cut Moria out of his will. He totally cut her allowance, which was a thousand times more than my pappy gave me for being useless around the house. Heather...Moria's mother...she has money of her own

that she was going to leave to Moria, but it's nothing like what she would've gotten if Tom hadn't changed his mind."

"You don't know why?"

"I can guess. Around the same time, Tom started pestering Moria about getting swabbed for a DNA sample. She couldn't exactly tell him to go fuck himself, him being her pot-of-gold daddy and all. But she put him off. So far as I know, he never got any cheek cells, or whatever it is they use for that."

"He didn't think he was her father?"

"Kinda looks like that."

Ari brooded on this a moment. "Do you know how Jerry reacted to this?"

"No. But he had to cut back on the gallery shows. I guess that would make any artist mad."

"Was there any possibility that they could have lost their home?"

"Not unless they didn't pay their taxes. Her daddy paid cash for it, not long before the split."

"What is Heather Massington like?"

"Royalty. She has a way of making you feel like a grasshopper. Moria's older brother was killed in a car wreck years ago and so far as I know she never shed a tear."

"You knew Moria and her family back then?"

"I've known Moria since we were teens. We met at Regency Mall. She was shopping. I was looking. We hit it off."

"Did you sleep with her?"

"Now you're stretching."

"We heard things about America," Ari said limply, tacitly adding that in backwater Sicily one didn't hear much about other countries--just the smut. "I've heard of men having sex with camels, too. Not in America, though."

"Now that's humping!" Tina laughed. "No, Moria and I never humped. Never occurred to us."

"To you," said Ari.

"Okay, I couldn't read her mind. But I never saw anything that would make me think she lusted after me."

"Did you know her parents well?"

"I only went to her house a few times. You know, the middle class piece of shit visiting the palace."

"They didn't make you feel welcome."

"As welcome as a worm."

"So you don't know if Heather was the type of woman..."

"To have a bastard? You never know. Moria never said anything about it." Tina paused to catch her breath. She had warmed to the discussion. "They came by the shop on opening day. All I remember was her sneer. 'My little girl going into trade!' You would have thought she preferred streetwalking. They liked Jerry, though."

"Did you?"

"He was weird. All the artists I've met are rebels or art-for-shit's-sake types. Jerry was super patriotic, super community involvement. That's why old Tom took a shine to him. Maybe he thought Jerry would put Moria on track. Not that she was ever off-track. She was never a wild girl."

"Except when it came to sharing product with friends."

Tina froze. Ari had taken the risk because he was sure Tina would never reveal Moria's source.

"Why did you use that word?"

"Product? That isn't the correct word?" Ari smiled stupidly.

"It's all right," Tina said, the alcohol allaying her suspicion.

"Did Moria have a cat?"

"Huh? Yeah, she did, come to think of it. A big yellow tabby. Moose?"

"Marmaduke?"

"Oh yeah, Marmaduke. How did you know? Is he still hanging around the house? Did he give you his name?" Tina barked at her wit.

"Heather must have thought a lot of her daughter. I mean, for her to leave money to her daughter, in spite of everything."

"Maybe. And maybe she felt sorry...finally."

"Did her parents know about her dealing 'product'?"

"Not that I know of."

"Did she take any of it?"

Tina twisted her lips.

"How about Jerry?" Ari continued.

"Ha! Pure as the driven snow." She thought the pun funny and waited for Ari to laugh. He chuckled obligingly.

"I'll take that as 'no'. Where are Jerry's parents?"

"Dead. No siblings."

"And no inheritance from them?"

"Nothing comes from nothing."

"Ah..." Ari nodded sagely. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

He stubbed out his cigarette and walked over to the bar. The bartender had been called to the kitchen. Marybelle gave him an inquiring look. He smiled and shook his head. When the bartender came back, Ari asked where the bathroom was. In the back, across from the kitchen. As he passed Marybelle, she smirked:

"You could've asked me."

In the john he relieved himself of several ounces of Canada Dry and Long Island Tea, studying the graffiti above the urinal as his bladder relaxed.

'For the best BJ call Tina'...followed by a phone number.

His Tina? Napkins might not be the only cause of wear on her lipstick. He had not noticed a wedding band.

He noted a rubber strainer in the base of the urinal. It bore the slogan, 'Beat Drug Addiction'. He flushed. It was like pulling the lever on a voting machine. Of course, he had only ever voted for one man--as had they all.

When he came out, Tina was gone. Marybelle and the bartender were intent on being preoccupied. Ari left.

As he walked briskly up the sidewalk, Tina half stumbled out of the cobblestone alley that ran behind Ali's Market. She had reapplied her lipstick--without, it appeared, the aid of a mirror.

"Mr. Simon."

Ari stopped and looked down at her.

She waited for him to respond, then said, "You didn't ask where she got the product."

"No, I didn't." He resumed walking. She stutter-stepped beside him, struggling to keep up.

"Hold on, will you?"

"Why? You want to tell me? Why? Because you've changed your source? Because it no longer bothers you to betray your old provider?"

She hesitated only for a moment, but it was long enough to put her well behind. She raced after him.

"They kicked me out of the Shamrock because of you."

"They'll let you back. They only wanted to be rid of me."

"But it hurts, you know? It hurts."

Ari found it embarrassing to have a woman chasing after him. He turned to face her. "You'll make it up."

"It hurts..."

She was encompassing much more than an evening's income. Everything hurt. It had a sorrowful effect on her appearance. Invisible weights dragged at her face, her unbuttoned jacket, even her black hosiery, wrinkled at the knees.

"Stop using your product," he said. "And stop drinking so much. Maybe then you can pull your life together."

"And if that doesn't work?" Her voice had the plaintive edge of a child or a hoarse old woman.

"We all take risks." He turned away from her.

"Could you at least give me a ride home?"

"I have an appointment."

"You're loaded with appointments, aren't you. Listen, I don't think I can drive like this."

"How do you usually get home?"

"All right. I usually risk it. But for once...can't we give the world a break?"

Give the world a break....

He glanced at his watch. It was only 8:30. He looked on as she wobbled unsteadily on her shoe heels. They weren't especially high, but she might as well have been teetering on a mountain ledge. He imagined her careering into an oncoming car.

Give the world a break.

"Very well. Do you live far away?"

FOURTEEN

The heat in the Bradley would have been tolerable under normal circumstances, but the balaclava made it a torment. Ghaith told Captain Rodriguez he preferred getting blown up in the open to dying of heat stroke inside the fighting vehicle. Rodriguez was preoccupied punching grid coordinates into his GPS and nodded absent-mindedly. But he defeated Ghaith's intention when he glanced up and called Sergeant Mastin over.

"Our interpreter wants to dismount. See that he has some proper chicken plates."

Mastin returned with a flak jacket. Hot. Heavy. In no time Ghaith was in worse shape than before.

"You sweat like Tom Jones in concert," Mastin joked. He too was dismounted.

They had no trouble keeping up with the convoy, which was moving at a crawl and stopped whenever they spotted someone who might have information. Since there were very few people on the harsh, sewage-filled streets deep inside the former Saddam City, they stopped just about everyone they saw

"Ayna howen?" Ari asked.

"No!" was the universal answer. Sometimes they added, in English, "No mortars!"

"RPG?"

"No RPG!"

"Mahdi?"

"No Mahdi!"

That was a howler. The Mahdi Army practically ran the district.

“Ask him if Muqtada al-Sadr is hiding under his sister’s bed,” Mastin snarled. He too suffered from the heat, but Ghaith shot him a critical look anyway. So much for sensitivity to local customs. He did not translate the question.

They arrived at an empty playground. Rodriguez went on the commo net to tell them that, according to the Q36, this was where some mortar rounds had come from two nights ago. The deathly gray of the playground would have seemed unnatural elsewhere, but was perfectly normal in Sadr City. All the buildings were a harsh, desert brown-and-gray. In other neighborhoods, even poor ones, residents would try to enliven their surroundings with plants or colorful outdoor murals. Not here. The few windows were heavily barred, or bricked up, or both.

Ghaith took out an enchilada that Ropp had given him from an MRE. Ropp had told him they had field rations that were halal, and was surprised when Ghaith shrugged off the offer. He took the enchilada without sauce, tearing off the wrapper and eating it plain.

Not bad.

Rodriguez radioed the lead platoon, out of sight up ahead, while several squads spread out across the playground, looking for hidden weapons caches. But it appeared as if the mortar tubes were long gone--as the skeptical lieutenant had earlier told Rodriguez they would be.

Ghaith was walking about ten feet behind Mastin when the sergeant cupped his hand over the side of his helmet and listened. Ghaith was not supplied with a communications link and had no idea what orders were coming down.

Mastin nodded, then called out to his squad. "Blue Platoon reports IP's in the AO headed our way. Don't get trigger-happy."

Iraqi police in the Area of Operations. Sure enough, a minute later two men came around the corner and began walking along the edge of the playground. They wore light blue shirts and dark trousers. Their baseball hats said POLICE in large white letters, while their brassards repeated the message in English and Arabic. Their body armor looked fragile. They were both carrying Kalashnikovs.

Captain Rodriguez was down from the Bradley and went up to the policemen to shake their hands. Knowing he would be summoned, Ghaith began sauntering over. After a closer look at the two policemen Ghaith's face twisted up. Two more criminals from the pre-invasion release. This was getting ridiculous. On the other hand, it only made sense. Most of the inmates at Abu Ghraib and other prisons had been Shia, all had been poor, and a large percentage of them had gravitated to Saddam (now Sadr) City upon their release. Ghaith could expect to see plenty of scum on this patch of earth. And in spite of the power shift at the Ministry of Interior, there were still a lot of Shia in the police force, so it was not inconceivable that these two cops were legitimate. Sending Shia to police a Shia neighborhood only made sense, even if one was a counterfeiter and the other a serial rapist of both boys and girls.

Rodriguez was busy schmoozing the pair of them. Ghaith finished off his enchilada, wiped the grease off his mouth with his bare hand, and wiped his hand off on one of the blue shirts speaking pidgin to the captain. The policeman turned, saw what had been done to his clean shirt, and raised his eyes to Ghaith.

"What is this, brother?" he demanded.

“Ayri bi rabbak,” Ghaith answered, smiling.

A look of disgust came over both policemen. Captain Rodriguez, who had thought he was doing so well winning over these particular hearts and minds, shot Ghaith a warning look.

“It’s nothing, Captain,” Ghaith told him. “I know Dalash and Abu Shihab from before the war. We didn’t get along all that well. But that’s all in the past, now.”

The policeman Ghaith had used as a napkin broke out in a rapid-fire Arabic dialect that Rodriguez could not begin to follow. Which was just as well, since he was denouncing the Americans for hiring vulgar idiots to be their interpreters. Of course, neither Dalash the serial rapist nor Abu Shihab the counterfeiter had any clue who Ghaith was.

Gesticulating, swearing, all but spitting out their wrath, the insulted policemen resumed their march past the armored column. Ghaith thought it quite a subdued reaction to what he had said and done. His suspicion mounted. He watched as the two of them turned left, away from the column.

“What did you say to piss them off so much?” Rodriguez asked. “What does Ayri bi rabbak mean?”

“Oh, it’s an old Iraqi greeting.”

“Meaning?”

“‘My dick in your god’ is a reasonable translation.”

The captain had begun to climb up the side of the Bradley. He froze, one hand stretched towards the turret, craned his head back, and said incredulously, “You said what?”

*Ghaith saw one of the policemen reach under his body armor for his shirt pocket.
And a cell phone.*

“IED!” he yelled, throwing himself to the ground.

But the explosion was further up the road. Rodriguez jumped into the Bradley turret and grabbed his headset. He heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Where is Lieutenant Baker?” Rodriguez demanded, focusing on what had happened several blocks away.

“This is Sergeant First Class Morrison,” came a voice. “They got one of the soft-skin Humvees. It’s a mess—“

“Secure the site. Do you hear me? Work the medevacs—“ Rodriguez raised his eyes and saw two full squads of men racing away from him, led by the platoon commander. In the distance was his interpreter, chasing after two policemen.

“Jesus clusterfuck!” Rodriguez swore, bringing up his hand mike and shouting, “Deadly force! Deadly force!”

He entered the house through the garage and automatically checked the tape at the top of the back door. It was unbroken. No one had entered through here since that second night, when Sphinx slipped indoors. Had the intruder given up? Or had he found what he was looking for?

He went back into the bare living room and looked at the chimney. If it was Howie Nottoway who had searched here, his fear had been a first-class act--because he already knew nothing was hidden in the fireplace. And if he had found something, there would have been no cause for fear or thespian antics.

But Howie must be involved. Unless someone was staked out in the woods across Beach Court Lane (which Ari thought unlikely, but he would check it out next morning), he had the only feasible post from which to track Ari's comings and goings. Ari would have spotted anyone watching from a car. Howie had spoken to the two officers who had found the bodies, and probably knew Carrington through the Neighborhood Watch Association. If he had seen Ari's distinctive xB depart for the Firefox Gallery that night, he could have alerted any of them that the house was empty.

But how had Carrington...and Sandra...known he would be at Firefox? Were the police and U.S. Marshals Service working together? Or were there *two* groups watching his house?

Ari saw two possibilities, one involving chance, the other certainty, and one only a little less likely than the other. Carrington had been visiting Howie that night to learn what Howie had found out about his new neighbor. They had seen Ari leave and Carrington had tailed him.

Sandra's presence at the Firefox could be easily explained by the Scion so kindly provided Ari by the U.S. Government—complete, perhaps, with a tracking device similar if not identical to the LoJack system promoted by car dealers.

What else could Sandra be watching? His computer was being monitored, of that he was positive. Could she be watching him in real time? If there were cameras in the house, Sandra must have busted a gut watching him chase Sphinx and walk around in his underwear. She would have been puzzled by his searching of the house, or perhaps she would have had a better idea of what he was looking for than he did.

He glanced at his watch. Ten-thirty. Plenty of time.

Within fifteen minutes he had satisfied himself that no one was observing his every step and bowel movement. There were no discreet spyholes, no mysterious bulges in the ceiling, nothing but light bulbs in the overhead fixtures. He went into the garage, turned on the light, and scowled at the despised xB. A cursory inspection came up empty, but that did not mean a transmitter wasn't imbedded in the frame. Even if he found one, its removal would alert Sandra that he knew she was tracking him. She might explain away her presence in the gallery as a coincidence--she had just wanted to see the art of the man whose house she had placed Ari in. But Ari had always doubted the U.S. Marshal would let him run loose without any oversight.

They would know he had been at the Chinese market at the time of the robbery attempt, yet Sandra had not mentioned it. The store manager's loyalty might have proven critical. Sandra had not connected him to the shooter.

He was vulnerable at three points, then: Howie, the computer, the car. And possibly a fourth: Mackenzie. He might soon find out.

A fifth vulnerability, one that had brought him to this new land, was permanent.

He rolled his office chair into the master bedroom, turned off the light, and sat at the window, sipping slowly on a glass of tapwater. It was a little after eleven. The middle of the river was almost invisible, with only a few reflected lights forming broken lines on the water. He could not see the Mackenzie house, but their porch light spread a faint arena across the shore. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he thought he could discern the outline of the island. If there were boats out there, he could not see them. Still, the weather was perfect. He might very well get lucky.

Occasionally, he glanced down upon the yard, on the off chance he would spot a

yellow tabby approaching the Riggins house. He berated himself for missing Sphinx.

He could have had company for the night. Tina had made that clear when he dropped her off at her apartment complex. With some difficulty, she had leaned sideways across the knob of the shift stick and placed a warm hand on his chest, as though trying to cup his heart. Then, sensing perhaps there was nothing there, she drew back. Not bitterly, though, but with a wan smile.

"You going to turn me in?" she said in a tone that invited him to spank her.

"To the police? Of course not." Ari smiled back at her. "Did you or Moria sleep with Detective Carrington?"

"Me? Maybe. Not that I remember, though." Her smile turned sad. Ari the Innocent. "Moria? Never in a million years."

"She was faithful to Jerry?"

"I didn't say that." She got out without saying more. Ari leaned down and spoke through the open passenger window.

"According to the news, there was some jewelry missing. Do you think Moria could have sold it to a pawnbroker?"

"Anything's possible," said Tina, waving without turning back and striking out up the sidewalk with a sashay more drunk than sexy.

What was the colloquial name for a cat? Pussycat. Pussy. Ari smiled. His English was good. Then his face dropped.

Ah, Sphinx, you faithless creature....

A rocket went up in the middle of the river. The whistle and loud pop at the end were distinct, only slightly muffled by the closed window. He studied the light from the

Mackenzie's porch. It remained on. Were they out for the night? Or unconscious? Perhaps Matt had hustled his wife off to Rome.

He ran downstairs and opened the front door. He checked his watch. Eleven forty-three.

Almost five minutes later another rocket went up. Ari switched his porch light off, then on, then off, then on. He grabbed the bag of zip ties from the living room, strolled down to the gazebo, and sat on the bench. He leaned forward, lifted away two floorboards, and pulled out a black plastic trash bag. He removed the Tec-9 from the bag and checked it closely. He laid it on the bench beside him.

He waited almost ten minutes before he saw--or thought he saw--a smooth low shape on the water, like a miniature submarine. It would make sense for the distributors to survey the beach before committing themselves. Ari slipped some zip ties in his pocket, then leaned forward and waved.

"Product!" came the voice over the water.

"Yes!" Ari shouted.

With the flowing ease of a snake the black kayak approached. It took Ari a moment to distinguish the black-attired men inside.

A regular pair of ninjas....

Leaving the gun behind, he stepped out in the yard.

Although their next words were spoken lowly, Ari was just able to make out the exchange:

"Come on, man, paddle!"

"He's wearing a jacket and tie!"

It hadn't occurred to Ari that looking respectable would pose a problem. He struck a pose of impatience.

"I don't have all night!"

They eased a little closer to land. Ari walked down to the edge of the lawn, only a few feet from the riverbank.

"Take off your jacket!"

Ari shrugged, removed his jacket, and draped it over his arm.

"Throw it down!"

"It's brand new!" Ari protested.

"Then adios amigo!"

"Damn!" Ari threw the jacket on the grass. His white shirt must stand out clearly. They would be able to see he was not wearing a holster. To make it even more obvious, he raised his arms shoulder level and performed a formal pirouette. One of the kayakers laughed.

"Okay...stay there."

There was a soft thud as the kayak hit the land shelf about ten feet from shore. As Ari expected, it was the same two-man craft the Mackenzies had summoned to their yard. The paddlers wore black wetsuits and Viper night vision goggles. More commandos. Masked by their suits, goggles and head gear mounts, it took Ari a moment to determine they were white. The man in front squeezed out of his cockpit, rolling his legs over the side until he was shin-deep in water. The second man stayed in the kayak, holding it in place with one end of his paddle braced on the shallow riverbottom, the other hand free. The hollow between his legs could harbor a gun, Ari theorized. Even with a sprayskirt it

would have to be covered to guarantee the weapon stayed dry. That would cause a delay when he reached down for it.

The man who came on shore was in his early to mid twenties. He removed his goggles and gear mount, leaving his helmet strapped under his chin. A strand of hair slid out from the brim and lay like a dark "C" on his forehead. He was wary, but also strangely shy, as if apologizing in advance for his line of business. He carried a black rubber bag that made an odd zippery suction sound when he opened it.

"What's your poison?"

Ari's English wasn't that good. His confusion was apparent. When it dawned on the young man that he was dealing with a non-native, he grinned broadly. "That's right. Your neighbors said you were an Arab. What are you, some kind of Saudi oil minister?"

"Alas, Allah hasn't been that kind to me."

"Freaky." The young man turned to his companion and called out, "A fucking Muslim cokehead!"

"Great," said the other from the kayak.

Ari calculated he could handle the two of them then and there, gun or no gun, if he was willing to get his new suit wet. He wasn't. The young man seemed delighted to be dealing to a foreigner. That seemed promising.

"You...want...coke?" the young man said, turning back to Ari and holding two rubber-gloved fingers to his nose. "How...much?"

"Coke?" Ari said uncertainly, grinning with stupid politeness. "I no want Coke. I not thirsty."

"Oh great." The young man slowed his voice even further, accompanying his

words with broad sign language. "You...know...about...us? They..." He pointed next door. "...tell...you?"

Ari looked at him blankly. "They have Coca-Cola."

"Oh boy..."

"You want to hurry it up?" the guy in the kayak complained.

"Hold on," his partner shot back. "We're dealing with international relations here." He smiled at Ari. "Do you know...the meaning...of a buck?"

"I'm sorry?" Ari wanted to laugh. The dealer was friendly but greedy. He was going to apply some artificial inflation.

"How...much...you...want...spend?"

"I don't know. Here, I show--"

"Whoa! Where are you going?"

"Over here. Keep money in..." Ari cupped his fingers and made a screwing motion over them.

"Oh man, the sheik keeps his money in a jar!"

"Let's go!" said the voice from the kayak.

"Hold on!" The young man was yelling at both his partner and Ari, who was walking slowly to the gazebo. Then he repeated, for Ari's benefit, "Hold...on!"

Ari paused and turned, raising his arms as though being crucified on his ignorance. To his dismay, as the young man strode up he trod on the new sports jacket. Ari contained his wrath with difficulty.

"Where are you going!" the guy in the kayak shouted.

"He's got his money up here! He'll probably give me the whole shebang!" He

came abreast of Ari and said, "Okay, let's go."

Ari had only once allowed a cashier to pluck money out of his wallet. After that, he quickly taught himself the rate of exchange.

Dark shadows crisscrossed the gazebo interior. When Ari reached down for the Tec-9, the young man reasoned it could be a jar. When Ari pointed it at his head he began to reach out for his money. When he saw his mistake, he looked ready to burst into tears.

"I should've known."

"Yes, you should have," said Ari pedagogically.

And then the young man swelled up. He was going to yell a warning to his partner despite the threat of being shot. Ari admired his loyalty and clipped him on the jaw. He dropped.

Ari stepped off the gazebo platform and marched down to the beach. When the man in the kayak saw the gun at his side he reached down.

"If you take out a gun I'll kill you," Ari said matter-of-factly.

The kayaker sensed the truth of the warning and bolted upright, his hand still empty. He filled it quickly with paddle-shaft and began to push off.

"If you do that I'll shoot your boat full of holes and you'll have to swim ashore anyway. You'll find that difficult, because I intend to shoot you in the arms, too."

The kayaker stopped, the two blades of his paddle hanging equidistant to either side.

"You didn't say 'freeze'," the second young man said.

"No."

"You're not a cop..."

"Freeze," said Ari. "And fast. You're drifting away."

The kayaker seemed inclined to float with the current. His night goggles allowed him to clearly see Ari aiming the Tec-9 at his head. With sluggish reluctance he paddled to the shore.

"Get out and drag the boat up here."

Squeezing past the sprayskirt, the young man jumped in the water. He glanced up at Ari and the gun, then hooked his hand on the rim of the front cockpit and hauled the kayak up onto the lawn.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

"Why don't you--"

Ari sucker-punched him in the solar plexus and used the zip ties as flex-cuffs when he doubled over. He planted a foot on his buttocks and pushed him forward onto his stomach, the young man howling when the goggles banged into his head. Ari flex-cuffed his ankles.

Going back to gazebo, he found the first kayaker woozily coming to. He offered only feeble resistance when Ari applied the zip ties and took away his goggles. He went up to the house and switched off the porch light. He then donned the goggles and checked the perimeter of his yard. The Viper allowed him to see into the woods. Satisfied no one was watching, he walked down to the kayak. The second man began to yell. Ari told him to shut up, or he would shoot him. He shut up.

He tilted the kayak sideways and reached below the sprayskirt. He found another waterproof pouch similar to the one the first man had opened, plus a Ziploc bag

containing a flashlight, a knife, a cell phone and a .38 Smith & Wesson Special with a stylish red handle. He opened the black pouch. It contained small plastic bags. There were three sizes, it seemed. Gram, half-gram, quarter-gram. He went over to the second man.

"Where is the money?"

"What are you talking--"

Ari kicked him in the stomach and walked up to the gazebo.

"Where is the money?"

"What money?" the first kayaker said.

Ari kicked him in the stomach and went back to the second man, who was beginning to recover his breath.

"Where is the money?"

"I..."

"I believe you've already been on the river for several hours. This is the last stop before the rapids. You wouldn't risk losing your cargo. I suspect you have a car waiting for you at the park entrance just a little way down from here. You will hand your money over to the driver, then. Where is it?"

"You crazy--"

Ari kicked him in the stomach and returned to the gazebo. He repeated his story of where they had been and where they were headed. The young man stared at him. Several locks of hair had dropped down to join the original "C".

"You're not a cop."

"Actually, I am. Or was. Where is the money?"

"Under Mark's wetsuit," the young man said.

"Mark is your partner there?"

"Don't be stupid."

"You're right, it was a stupid question." Ari kicked him again and went back to Mark. Turning him over, he pulled off the kayaker's headgear and studied the monocular scope. He had seen many of these and had often wondered what the U.S. Government shelled out for them. "How much is this worth?"

The young man grunted.

"I said--"

"Around three-hundred."

"Mmmm..." Ari said, putting the goggles next to his jacket. "Now, is the money under your wetsuit?"

Another grunt. Ari reached down, unzipped the wetsuit to the waist, and found a money belt. He pulled apart the Velcro strap and took out a wad of bills.

"Mmmm..." he murmured. He stood back, jammed the money into his pocket. As he strolled up the lawn to the gazebo he removed a cigarette from his pack. When he flicked his lighter the world exploded. Cursing, he whipped off the set of goggles from his head, temporarily blinded by the magnified flash of the lighter. The man on the lawn barked a mirthless laugh.

"Very amusing," said Ari, waiting for his vision to return. He considered kicking the second kayaker again, then decided against it.

Several minutes passed before he could see well enough to finish his transit to the gazebo. He sat on the bench, lit his cigarette, and regarded his first prisoner. Without the

goggles he was little more than a lump in the dark.

"You have a .38 caliber gun in your boat. That's the same caliber used to kill the Riggins family."

"Oh no," the young man gasped. "No, not us."

"I'm sure the police will be interested to check the ballistics on your gun."

"Yeah, and they'll be interested when they see you've beat the shit out of us."

"A few kicks?" Ari said breezily. "I've watched men have their eyes burned out with these." He waved the cigarette in the air, the glowing end like a sharp comet.

"You can kill someone kicking them like this."

"Sometimes. But I've found that a few good kicks can be most salubrious," said Ari.

"Where did you learn English?"

"A female cosmonaut taught me." Ari stood and went down to his second prisoner. "Why did you shoot the Riggins family? Why did you kill the boys?"

"I didn't..."

"I mean the two of you." Ari crouched easily beside him.

"Okay, *we* didn't."

Ari looked up and saw the Mackenzie's porch light was still on. Whether they were sleeping or bar-hopping, it provided a false note of occupation.

Glancing down, he could just make out Mark's rapid blinking, as though he was trying to clear water out of his eyes. Perhaps he wore glasses when he was not prowling the night like some mutated rodent.

"Let us reconstruct that night," Ari began, sounding a little too enthusiastic for the

prisoner's comfort. He complained that he did not feel well. "Yes, police brutality is sickening," Ari nodded. "Now, on the night of the murders, the two of you rowed up in your boat, dressed just as you are now. Gaining access to the house was probably easy. You took the Rigginses by surprise and shot them all. The motive was obviously drug-related, which usually means money-related. Perhaps you found out that Moria was re-selling what she bought from you and you didn't like the competition. Or she had simply failed to pay you and you did what drug-dealers worldwide do when they collect a debt."

"Wrong, wrong and wrong," the kayaker gasped. He really wasn't feeling well. It would complicate matters enormously if he died, but Ari didn't think he had kicked him hard enough to cause a fatal hemorrhage. Then again, he had misjudged the damage he had inflicted on the robber at the Chinese grocery.

"There was jewelry missing," said Ari. "Did you take that in lieu of payment?"

"Oh god..."

"If you die, I'll eat you. I really enjoyed those cannibal movies with...I can't recall the actor's name. They're very good, very realistic. I'm sure you saw them."

The thought that he might end up being served with *couscous* breathed new life into the kayaker. His eyes went wide, with scarcely a blink.

"We didn't kill anyone."

"Then I suppose you keep this out of your love of humanity. I'm holding up your Smith & Wesson, in case you can't see."

"It's for protection. You meet all kinds of loonies in this business." His tone inferred that Ari was living proof of his assertion.

"If you choose to live dangerously, you must expect to encounter danger every so

often."

"Aw shut up."

"What was that?" Ari asked.

"Nothing."

"I think I'll kick you again and then go up to your partner and ask the same questions."

"Oh shit, no! No! No--awshit! Oh! Oh!"

Ari went back to the gazebo and sat on the bench.

"What did he say that made you kick him again?" the first kayaker asked breathlessly.

"You are wise to ask. His answers were insufficient and his attitude was insufferable."

"I'll try to do better," the first man said contritely.

"Excellent. Did either or both of you kill the Rigginses?"

"No."

"You were out here the night of the murders, weren't you?" said Ari. "Mark says you killed them because you wanted to take over the territory. That Moria Riggins was 'Mr. Big.' She was your source."

"Mark wouldn't say that because it isn't true."

"Kick a man enough times and he'll say anything." Ari leaned back and took a philosophical puff on his Winston. "Only a few years before I was born there was in my country a place called Qasr al-Nihayah. This can be translated as the Palace of the End. It was one of the largest torture chambers in history. You would say the inmates were

political prisoners, although many were there simply because someone didn't like them. Well, political prisoners aren't very likable in the first place. You would know that if you had to deal with them on a regular basis. They're always up in arms about something or other. If we put them all in a cage, they would kill each other off. Ideologues, all of them. Fanatics."

"I thought you said this was all before you were born," said the kayaker warily, seeking hints for what was to come.

"There was a coup attempt in the late Seventies. The chief torturer wanted to take over the government. It didn't pan out that way and the palace staff--well, it was cut back drastically, shall we say. I was nine years old when all that happened. And the palace itself was blown to bits by a Tomahawk in 2003. But these political prisoners...they weren't anything to wet your tears about."

"Wet your tears?"

"Maybe that's the wrong expression. Well, they didn't go away. Your government expresses great concern about creating a new generation of terrorists, but there will always be these types. Personally, I prefer thugs and murders and...well, drug dealers like yourself. You have a clear idea of what you're about. Nothing fancy. They're much more pleasant to deal with. Take yourselves. I can see you're well-educated, well brought up. You might even have manners."

"Thank you," said the kayaker.

"See? You even go to the trouble to prove my point. That's real courtesy. You would have been an unlikely candidate for the Palace of the End. You'd end up in one of the common cells, with nothing worse than a few beatings--if you died it was accidental,

at least half the time. The methods of torture they used at the Palace were unspeakable even to me, and I'm part Assyrian. We've had five thousand years of practice at this sort of thing. Once the monarchy was gone, there was a group that believed nothing like the Palace should ever exist in my country again. Turned out to be a dream, but not a bad one."

"So which one were you?"

"You mean later? I had no choice. I grew up under a tyrannical regime. Dreams are the first thing to go."

"What are you going to do to me?" the kayaker asked, trembling. Such a long speech on Ari's part could not be leading up to anything good. "To us?"

"I'll let you go, of course," said Ari. "I don't think you killed the Riggins family. You don't have the instinct for that sort of thing, or you would have put up a better fight. But I want you to prove your innocence to me. For example, did Moria Riggins see your rocket that night and did she come down to the shore?"

"Yes," the young man said after a long pause.

"What was she wearing?"

"A robe and slippers."

"You mean a dressing gown?"

"A robe. You know, like you put over your pajamas."

"That's what I meant." Ari paused to line up more questions in his mind. "Did you buy from her or did she buy from you?"

"She bought a lot more than one person could ever use. She wasn't our supplier."

"Is your supplier waiting for you at the park entrance?"

The kayaker didn't answer. Ari stood.

"Yes."

Ari sat back down. "Does he have a lot of money?"

"I don't know."

"When do you usually arrive at his...what kind of car does he drive?"

"A red Bronco. He'll be expecting us within the hour. There's no fixed time."

"Do you think he'll come looking for you?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Do you think he'll come looking for me after you tell him what's happened?"

"I'm sure of that, too," the young man answered grimly.

"Excellent. We're doing very well. How long have you been selling product to Moria?"

"A couple of years."

"Did she always pay you in cash?"

"She paid us with some jewelry last time. We took the chance, and it turned out not to be fake."

"Do you have a key to this house?"

"No. Why would I?"

"To gain access to murder the family."

"Are you back to that?" the kayaker said, his voice raising several notches.

"I have to keep it in mind that you two might be the killers."

"But you said--"

"I might be wrong. You still haven't convinced me. Did you know Moria was the

mother of two boys?"

"Not then. I heard about it after."

"Did she often come down here in her pajamas?"

"Almost always."

"Did you meet her husband?"

"Near the end...he would stand up on the porch, watching. I got the feeling he didn't like what was going on."

"Did Moria speak about it?"

"I asked her if he would cause trouble. She said he was a dickless wonder. That she could handle him."

"She used those words? 'Dickless wonder'?"

"She was sort of a bitch, but I've met worse."

"You allow women to talk to you like that?"

"You haven't been in America long, have you?"

"So he never caused any problems?"

"Not until the last night we came."

"What happened?"

"He came down here screaming and raving. He threatened to shoot us."

"He owned a gun?"

"Well yeah. We sold it to him. Well, to Moria. She said she felt the need for protection."

"From what?"

"She said from people like us." The young man laughed harshly.

"What kind of gun?"

"Thirty-eight. Identical to the one you took out of our kayak, red stock and all."

"Ammunition?"

"You can get that anywhere. Green Top. Southern Gun."

"Did Moria buy anything from you that night, when her husband threatened you?"

"She calmed him down and packed him back to the house. She asked us to come back in a half hour or so, after he'd gone to bed." The kayaker hesitated on top of a question, then jumped. "You tortured people?"

Ari thought for a moment. "You would say I did. I would never have advanced in my profession if I wasn't willing to inflict a little pain."

"Like kicking a man while he's down."

"Nothing wrong with that. The British imposed artificial boundaries on our land."

"Iraq?"

"They imposed artificial boundaries on many lands. Once the borders were established and the Europeans left, it was up to the native government to defend them. The opposition was violent. The measures we took against it were equally violent."

"But some of you guys enjoy inflicting pain," the young man said carefully.

"Some, yes. As for myself, I only did what I had to do to maintain civil order. I didn't deal with the political prisoners very often."

"But you beat them."

"Of course." Ari doubted his prisoner could see his smile. "I didn't make a habit of it. What Americans don't seem to accept is that government *is* violence, by definition. The imposition of rule. You package it here in neat paraphrases, the same way you

package your food, so that the original is unrecognizable. But there's little difference."

"We have the rule of law."

"And the law isn't a tyrant? But it has its uses. Even you, my friend, are no anarchist. You couldn't operate your little business in relative safety if everything was in chaos. But many of us see America as a land of delusions. Quite honestly, you don't seem to *want* to survive."

Ari saw movement near the house. He watched for a moment, until he was sure, then raised a finger

"Wait here."

"Funny."

Ari approached the front door carefully, making no sudden movements.

"Sphinx?"

A serpentine shadow eased along the porch, headed for the bushes.

"Marmaduke?"

The shadow returned, a pale, fluid form. Ari opened the door slowly and Sphinx edged closer.

"You want to come inside? Of course you do. Please, enter..."

Sphinx rolled out a rough, unfeminine meow and sat. Ari leaned down slowly. The cat raised up and darted into the bushes. Ari choked off a bellow of rage. Leaving the door open, he stormed to the gazebo and spoke loudly enough to be heard by both men.

"I will be back in thirty minutes. If you begin to yell for help, the good people of this neighborhood will call the police. The police will find your product and gun. They

will release you, put you in handcuffs, and take you away to jail. If that doesn't bother you, yell away."

"You sure you'll be back?" Mark moaned from beside the kayak.

"If you succeed in escaping, congratulations."

Eight minutes later, Ari had reached the nearest James River Park entrance. The red Bronco with a boat rack on the roof was parked under a tree in the gravel parking lot. A sign at the entrance told visitors the park closed at dusk. It was 12:48 in the morning.

Switching on his brights, he swerved around some trees and drove up fast on the Bronco's driver side, braking at the last instant. A pair of hands flew up to ward off the glare. Ari grabbed the Tec-9 off the passenger seat and jumped out. He ran to the Bronco door and flung it open.

"Would you please douse your headlights? And there's no need for that gun. I won't fight you."

The woman was perhaps fifty, well-preserved under a dark mantle of dignity. A subdued Afro highlighted her high cheeks and added strength to eyes that were otherwise quite gentle. Her chin betrayed a slight plumpness which Ari found strangely attractive.

"Get out," he said.

"I'm not dressed."

"Get out," he repeated.

She sighed, turned slowly in her seat, and gracefully descended. She was wearing blue fuzzy bunny slippers and her neck was hidden in a dark chandelle boa. She held her kimono robe closed with both hands.

"Those lights..." she complained softly.

Ari wanted her to lift her robe so he could check for weapons, but something in him balked. He might be godless, but he still held on to cultural discretion. Held on for dear life. He had only snatched the gum out of Sandra's mouth because she was so boldly insufferable. This woman radiated dignity, fluffed robe, slippers and all. He backed to the door of the xB, reached in, and dimmed the headlights. After a moment's consideration, he lowered the Tec-9 on the driver seat.

"Please move over against that tree."

The woman gathered up her robe and moved with regal ease. Her bunny slippers looked as though they were nibbling on the gravel. Ari leaned into the Bronco. Turning on the overhead light, he rummaged under the seats. He checked the glove compartment. He found a gun and held it up for her to see. She offered an indifferent shrug. Ari then searched the rear of the vehicle. In the cargo area there was a neat stack of towels and a change of clothing for the kayakers. Something could be stashed in the spare, but Ari did not think 'Mr. Big', aka 'Ms. Big', was the type to make things more difficult than was called for. No one had interfered with her trade, so there was no need to expend unnecessary effort to hide her product. He saw her looking away, probably towards the boat ramp. He did not feel inclined to harm her.

"For two years you've been doing this and the police haven't bothered you," said Ari, circling the Bronco and facing her. She turned her languid eyes on him and smiled. Ari couldn't help himself--he smiled back.

"You've been checking on me." She waggled her finger at him.

"Is Carrington protecting you? Have you paid him off? Or did you threaten to

expose Moria Riggins if he arrested you?"

"You calling me a blackmailer?"

Ari thought a moment. "I believe that's the right word."

"You're not very nice."

"Your...employees were out here on the river the night of the murders, weren't they?"

"My boys? They wouldn't hurt a fly."

"They carry a gun."

"All right, if the fly was big enough and mean enough, they might hurt him." She made it sound like a threat. Then she frowned. "How do you know--"

"You send them out on the open water in the middle of winter? They must be very dedicated. I admire that."

"They're in very good shape," she said in a sultry voice that alerted Ari to something more extensive than mere business. It was not the first time he had noted the relationship between criminal behavior and unorthodox sexual arrangements. But this being America, perhaps a black and white, May-September threesome wasn't all that unusual.

"Did they tell you what they saw?"

"They tell me everything. But that doesn't mean I tell you anything."

"The police would have been very interested in their evidence, don't you think? They knew...well, Carrington knew...there was a good chance what they saw could be critical. Has the detective interviewed you?"

She was listening for her boys, wondering at the delay. They hadn't even checked

in on her cell phone.

"Did you extend your favors to the Detective Sergeant?"

"He doesn't use product."

"So you do know him. But I was thinking of something else."

"You mean did I offer him *this*?" She let the robe open and spread her arms, displaying the amorous amplitude beneath her sheer night gown as if it was a prized possession that had been damaged in transit. But she had no higher opinion of Carrington's physical attributes. "I'm fond of my boys, not white carcasses."

"I see," said Ari, a little surprised by his own discomfort. "Then I assume they were serious when they said you will come after me when you found out what I have done to them."

He expected she could be formidable, but he knew from experience there was no adequate stance to meet the attack of an outraged woman untrained in hand-to-hand combat. Up to this point, Ari had admired her cool refinement under pressure. It took him aback when she lunged without preliminary. But he was ready when she went for his eyes. He sidestepped and she skidded on the gravel. When she caught herself and whirled, she did something that took him completely by surprise. Instead of resuming her flailing, no-holds-barred approach, she squared off and threw a roundhouse, catching him neatly on the jaw. He staggered back. Sensing victory, she came at him almost head-down, intent on knocking him over. He dodged, grabbed her by the waist, and stuck out his leg. As she tripped and fell, Ari took on the onerous task of easing her descent, holding on as best he could when she went face-down. This touch of charity paid off when his hands caught on something strapped under her nightgown. Necessity being the

destroyer of custom, he whipped up the hem of her robe.

"Oh no you don't," the woman growled, mistaking his intention and struggling to buck him off. "That's reserved."

Ari did not answer, but slipped his hands deftly under her gown. Realizing her error, the woman fought even harder when she felt his hands exploring her money belt. It was cinched with a Velcro strap that he easily pulled apart. The woman flattened herself on the ground, holding the pouch down with her weight. To his dismay, Ari began experiencing an erection. His task became all the more difficult as he tried to raise her off the pouch without pressing against the bared cheeks underneath him. It was only when she startled him with an involuntary burst of laughter that he saw the solution. He reached up higher and tickled the hot flesh of her armpits. She jumped and bucked even harder, giving Ari enough of a gap to slide the pouch out. He pulled away and stood with the money belt in his hand.

"I'll pack your boys off when I get back to the house. I have to run an errand first. Also, they won't have their night vision goggles. So there will be a delay of perhaps an hour."

The woman rolled over and sat up. The gravel made an uncomfortable seat and she began working her way to her feet. Ari leaned down to help and she almost managed to bite his hand.

"Give me that back."

Ari ignored the demand. "When you file your complaint with the detective sergeant, tell him I have solved his mystery for him."

"What makes you think--"

"I don't believe he's been taking a cut." He gave the belt a little shake. "He might even be pleased by your distress. You were blackmailing him, weren't you? He only agreed to keep the police away from you. As for any other trouble you might encounter, I believe the saying is, 'You're on your own!'"

"You don't know anything."

"I know the Rigginses died years ago. The murder was a formality. Allah willed it. In the meantime, I want to thank you for the gun and this." He shook the belt again. "Believe me, I have been severely underfunded up to this point."

No headlights appeared in his rearview mirror. He doubted Sandra and her peers were tracking him in real time. They probably only used the LoJack to keep a record of his comings and goings. But if someone noticed the xB making a mysterious foray to the park in the middle of the night, they might send someone out to check up on him.

I was gazing at the moon, as Jerry Riggins was allegedly doing when he was killed.

At an all-night gas and convenience store on Forest Hill Avenue he used his credit card to buy a small, overpriced bag of all-purpose flour, then drove home. The kayakers were still in the yard, though not quite where he had left them. The first one had rolled off the gazebo platform and managed to get several yards down the slope before fetching up against a bush, while Mark had wormed his way a short distance uphill. In another half hour or so one of them would have been gnawing at the zip ties binding the other. Ari crouched between them, a menacing ghost.

"I have only one question left for the two of you, and then I'll let you go." Ari

suddenly noticed the dew on the grass. He leapt up and ran over to his new jacket. It was damp. Teeth gritted, he draped it over the gazebo railing.

"What's the question?" the first kayaker asked.

"How many shots were fired?"

They didn't answer.

"That night. That very cold, bitter night when all normal men are at home with their wives, when the sound of a gunshot would carry clear and far. How many?"

"One..." Mark sighed. "When we came back later. We figured that crazy bastard was shooting at us and we took off."

"Just as I thought." Ari cut the ties with the knife he had taken from the kayak. They sat up, massaging their wrists and ankles.

"Be on your way. Your earth mother is waiting for you. The Kayak Express is no longer in operation. "

"What did you do to her?"

"She's only a little mussed. Don't make any threatening moves. In case you can't see, I'm aiming a gun at you."

"Where's our goggles?"

"You will leave without them."

"Go blind?"

"You know the way well. Go slowly. It's not far."

"But--"

"Don't argue, Mark," the first kayaker said, a grimace in his voice. "Let's get the hell out of here. I want to see how Mother's doing."

'Mother'. Psychologists might make studying the arrangement an interesting source of entertainment on a dull afternoon. Ari thought Mother might very well snap the boys' heads off for their incompetence. Well, that was one function of Motherhood.

The young men dragged the kayak back into the water and paddled away, slowly. Their recriminations and complaints faded downriver.

Ari gathered up his booty and hid it under the gazebo floor. The cash alone was an impressive haul, amounting to thousands. He went back up to the house, weary and strangely depressed. The front door was still open. There was no sign of Sphinx. He went inside and closed the door.

Upstairs, he inserted a hanger inside his jacket and hung it from the shower curtain rail in the bathroom. He stripped down to his shorts. His head was aching, perhaps as a result of his busy day--with more than a touch of Long Island Tea thrown in. Stretching out on his mattress, he allowed the tension in his body to drain into the compressed air underneath him. He turned onto his side.

As he drifted off, something furry and comforting inserted itself behind his bent knees.

"Ah, Sphinx," he murmured. "I knew you couldn't resist an open door..."

FIFTEEN

Unlike the Americans, Ghaith was not burdened by twenty-five or more pounds of equipment. He was wearing a flak vest, but so were the two men he was chasing. He was on equal terms. He did not think being outnumbered was of consequence. On the other hand, being weaponless could pose a problem.

He had to keep the fake IP's in sight. While he knew the general layout of Sadr City, he was not familiar with its nooks and byways. It would be easy for the two of them to lose themselves in an unexpected door or alley. Fortunately, the few pedestrians dodged out of the way. Most people did not want trouble. Even here. Especially here. The two would not be losing themselves in a crowd.

It had been a long year of physical inactivity for Ghaith. The luxury of jogging ten or fifteen kilometers had been reduced to seven, then one, then none. If you ran now, it was to save your own skin--or to rob someone of theirs. Yet he gained ground quickly after only a few blocks. The men ahead of him were getting winded. They were in even worse shape. The poor had never had the luxury of working out. Under the old regime, unless he belonged to the right crowd, a poor man risked arrest and torture for just showing his face. And if you were part of the right crowd, but still managed to get arrested, the torture was even worse.

They threw desperate looks over their shoulders. Did they assume Ari was armed? Or could they see the Americans humping around the corner behind him? Ghaith did not pause to check. At this point, the infantrymen were as likely to shoot him as they were the bombers. Ghaith understood how difficult it could be to tell allies from

foes.

His breathing was a little ragged, but he was pleased to note he could still move easily. During the embargo nearly everyone had gone hungry, and many, far too many, had starved to death--mostly infants and the elderly. But Ghaith had thrived. He was twenty pounds heavier than the average Iraqi--nearly all of it muscle. The Minister of Interior had been so pleased with his work that he had given him an honorary membership at the Nadi al-Said. At least twice a week, and usually more often, he would work out at the exclusive club's gym. His wife would sip at a martini while watching their children in the pool. He did not take her often, though. "Mr. Deputy's" son was known for his penchant for pretty wives, and if he came to the club and saw Ghaith's wife, he was sure to satisfy temptation.

Up ahead, one of the bombers said something to the other. They skidded to a halt and whirled, lowering their AK-47's. Ghaith jumped into a narrow alley to his right and flattened against the drab brown wall of the house on the corner. He could not see the Americans, nor could he hear them. But his view was blocked by the building on the other side of the alley. If the platoon commander and NCO's had any sense, and some of them did, they would understand the bombers might be luring them into another trap. They would be using hand signals to guide their men silently forward.

But he couldn't count on it.

The bombers would have no pity. He was working for the Americans. And he had told them only minutes earlier that he had fucked their god. They might just blow off his pecker and let him live with the consequences of his blasphemy. He looked up. The roof was low. If he could only find something to stand on--

Too late. There was a squishy sound. One of the men had stepped in raw sewage as he approached. They were moving slowly. If Ghaith was armed he could take them both down when they turned the corner.

"There!" came a shout from up the street. Frantic English, a dialect unto itself.

"Coos okt al laglesh," one of the bombers swore. The two men saw they had been spotted by what must have seemed to them like the entire 1st Cavalry Division. Ghaith assumed they were turning to run, since one of them had just said, "Fuck all this shit."

Ghaith leapt out of the alley. One man was still half-turned his way. As he raised his gun, Ghaith jammed his knuckles into his throat. There was a loud crack and he went down, making an odd sound like wind through rice paper.

Dalash, the second man, had barely begun to face his attacker when Ghaith kicked him in the side of the knee. There was a violent snap and he fell, screaming, his Kalashnikov clattering on the broken pavement. Ghaith picked it up and aimed it at the man's head.

"No!" A sergeant ran up, waving his free hand. "We need them for intel! Don't shoot!"

Ghaith stared at him wildly, unable to comprehend the dismissal of so obvious a necessity. This man had just killed some of their own American soldiers. Before that, Dalash the child rapist had lived a life that deserved only a quick and ugly finish.

"Sarge, I don't know about that AK," said a private, forgetting Ghaith knew English.

"Yeah..." The sergeant turned a stern eye on his Iraqi ally. "Sir, would you please hand that rifle over? It's United States property, now."

Ghaith, seeing so many guns around him, knowing that he could get another at any time, placed the weapon into the sergeant's gloved hands.

Lieutenant Pito joined them.

"Sergeant, secure the perimeter."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said blandly, although his squad had already fanned out.

A soldier kneeled next to the first bomber and pulled out a CLS aid bag. When he opened the bag several items rained down onto the bomber's chest, including syringes and a pair of blue examination gloves. He opened the man's mouth, preparing to insert a J tube. Then he paused.

"Sir, this man's status doesn't look too hot."

The lieutenant walked over and crouched, looking at the silent body and the crushed throat. "He doesn't have any status at all, soldier."

A loud roar announced the arrival of the Bradley, Captain Rodriguez standing in the turret. He ordered the driver to stop. He spoke into his microphone and the lieutenant's head jerked up.

Ghaith had dragged Dalash into the middle of the street and had pushed his face into the raw filth and refuse that had pooled in the center. Courtesy of the invasion and consequent power outages, pumps had failed and sewage formed brown streams wherever gravity took it. This included Ghaith's rage, which spiraled downward in a superheated disgust that focused on the shit in the street. What better place to bury Dalash? Dalash and his kind? The whole shitty world?

Ghaith wasn't deaf to the shouts around him. The whole world shouted, so a few added voices of outrage made no difference to the chorus. He lifted the man's face out of

the muck and slammed it down again. If he didn't drown, the stench would kill him.

"Watch it! He just killed an armed man with his bare hands!"

"And watch the spread!" another querulous voice joined in.

A nervous, familiar face came before Ghaith. Ropp, the private who had offered him the 'four fingers of death' all-beef franks earlier that week. He had just seen the friendly epithet become a grisly reality when Ghaith killed Abu Shihab with a blow to the throat.

"Sir! Back off from that prisoner!"

No longer mocking. Private Ropp's eyes were wide with fear and determination. He was pointing a shotgun at Ghaith. A Mossberg, favored by the infantry in house-to-house fighting. Ghaith had been present when word came down from command that the 5.56 was to be preferred over the 12 gauge, which had too wide a spread. Shooting an alleged terrorist in his living room might also bring down everyone else present, including the man's wife and children. The M16 was more discreet, hitting only what was aimed at. But here was a Mossberg, pointed straight at Ghaith's head. Ghaith began to laugh.

That's right. Take me down. Take down everyone. Take down the whole fucking mess.

The godless mess. God was too great to want anything to do with Iraq. Too great for the Americans. Too great for this piece of shit world. They were an experiment gone wrong. A discarded lab test that they were too stupid to realize had been flushed down the sewer.

"Sir! Back away!"

Ghaith let go of Dalash and allowed his will to survive to carry him back several yards. His face felt like fire. The balaclava scorched whatever it touched. But it was worse than mere heat. It was a symbol of what he had come to. He had joined the world of useless anonymity. Not that he had ever been well-known. But always before he had walked proudly, openly, secure in his position, or as secure as one could be in this antique, violent land. He had been a functionary extraordinaire. His prodigious talents had been rewarded, something that would have been highly unlikely under the old monarchy his father had known.

And now he was less than what he had been in the beginning, a pitiful nonentity swathed in a death mask, like a criminal facing execution.

"You okay, sir?"

He looked stonily into Sergeant Mastin's face. So fresh and healthy. So...unmasked.

"Do you know who I am?" Ghaith asked.

"Well, no. We're not supposed to know who you are, just so long as you weren't one of those Baathist assholes."

Baathist assholes. The same Baathists who had brought modernity and, yes, enlightenment to the country. Ghaith's education, a secular affair of science and wonders, was due to them and their leader. Ghaith had been able to marry the woman he loved because she loved him too, and the despised Baathists gave freedom to women to marry the man of their choice. Yes, they had brought wars. Yes, their leading families were despicable. Yet here was America telling Iraqis how loathsome the Baathists were. America, at war. America, its leading families and its guiding plutocracy demanding a

laughable transparency from the defeated. America, so transparent you couldn't see beyond the clouds of money. Except, of course, for that one day. The whole world saw, then.

And then the clouds closed in again.

"You're not supposed to know me," repeated Ghaith flatly.

"No, sir," said the sergeant, looking puzzled that the interpreter would even bring up such a bizarre topic. "Come on, we have to clear out of here."

"You will...soon enough."

"Sir?"

Captain Rodriguez came storming up. "You want to explain yourself, mister?"

Ghaith nodded at Dalash, who had been pulled out of the shit. A combat medic was applying a temporary splint to his leg.

"Él debe ser ejecutado inmediatamente."

He could not bear the gape of the captain, a reaction so extreme he might have just heard a donkey talk. Could an Iraqi not be educated? Could an Iraqi not have a mind? Ghaith pulled away from Rodriguez and the sergeant and faced the drab, windowless wall of the house across the street. An ugly house in an ugly city in a country universally reviled as the ugliest nation on earth.

Ghaith ripped off the balaclava.

"Here I am!" he screamed. "Here I am, the godless one!"

He stormed down the street, raising his fist at invisible watchers.

"You know me!" he shouted at a suburb stoked with former Shia prisoners. "You know me! I have ripped out your hearts! I have guided the demons to your doorstep!"

Forget the Americans! Look at me and see what it is to be truly godless! Burn your prayer rugs! Come join me! All of you are godless! Face the truth! Look at me!"

"Sir, we got a serious death wish here," said the sergeant, watching Ghaith, then glancing up nervously at the rooftops. He could not understand a word of what the Iraqi was saying, but he sensed Ghaith's behavior was making the place more dangerous by the second.

Sphinx shifted position during the night. When Ari awoke he found the cat curled next to his head, like some foreign agent trying to smother him in his sleep. Having collected several hours' worth of cat dandruff in his lungs, Ari gave a mighty sneeze. He watched in dismay as Sphinx jumped up and shot out the studio door. This was not what he had planned.

Rolling over, he punched the button on the computer tower, then stood and stretched. He leaned down and picked up the Tec-9 that he had prudently kept at his side, in anticipation of a visit from 'Mother' and her two boys. He did not consider it likely that they would come after him, but one never knew. He went to the bathroom, slipped the gun under the towels in the closet, and stared at his face in the mirror just long enough to foment a mild disgust at his appearance. He went back to the studio.

The log-on screen had just popped up on the monitor when Sphinx sashayed back into the studio and took up a position on the heat signature Ari had left on the mattress. After giving him a cagy look, the cat stretched, licked its anus, and folded itself into a near-perfect ball before falling asleep.

Ari slipped down to the garage and took the bag of flour out of the xB. He went

back upstairs and checked to make sure Sphinx was still on the mattress. He then descended to the basement and broke open the bag. Pinching out small clumps, he sprinkled flour around the utility room doorway and along the wall. He walked backwards up the stairs, spreading flour on several steps. Mentally gauging the stride of a frightened cat, he laid a five-foot-wide band of flour at the head of the stairs.

He went to each room on the first floor, creating a band of all-purpose along the walls. In the kitchen he was generous around the cabinets and on the counter top. By the time he had repeated the process upstairs, the five pounds of flour were fully distributed. Back in the studio, he tossed the paper bag aside and smiled down on his sleeping visitor.

"Illa! Illa!" he yelled, stamping his feet. Get out!

He took his time following the trail. There was no need to rush. The cat's pawprints were as clear as if it had been running in snow--and flour on polished wood proved to be almost as slippery.

Down the upstairs hallway, down the steps, through the living room...and into the kitchen. The tracks suddenly disappeared in the gap between the counter and the base of the stove.

"Ah..."

Retrieving the flashlight he had taken from the kayakers, Ari went down on his stomach and turned the beam down the dark tunnel. He saw nothing but the kitchen wall and yellow furballs that attested to Sphinx's frequent use of the passage.

He sat up with a grunt. Ignoring the flour covering his pajamas and arms, he puzzled over the cat's disappearance. Was there a hole behind the counter? Ari opened the bottom counter cabinet and peered past one of the few pots Sandra had provided him.

No hole and no cat. He grunted again and closed the door.

Still seated, he leaned forward and grasped the edge of the stove's bottom access panel. He lowered it on its hinge and angled down for a peek underneath.

A yellow comet blasted past his face. Ari just managed to avoid getting his eyes clawed as Sphinx howled out of the gap and across the kitchen floor, vanishing in a cloud of flour. After catching his breath, Ari rolled back onto his side and held the flashlight under his chin.

More fur, some greasy dirt, and the shiny, flexible tube of the stove exhaust. He swore at himself. How could he have been so stupid? The futile sucking of the Jenn-Air fan and the resulting houseful of smoke should have given him his answer.

Maybe I didn't spend enough time in field operations.

Reaching in, he slid the tube off the exhaust outlet. It dropped with a soft rattle, the end of the tube facing him. He poked his hand into the wide opening and immediately found what he was looking for. He pulled away and rolled up in a seated position, laying the pouch on his lap.

It was identical to the waterproof pouches used by the kayakers. No doubt they had given it to Moria, perhaps as some kind of bonus, like a credit card company handing out a cheap digital travel clock to anyone opening a new account. Unzipping the pouch, Ari found it stuffed with small Ziploc bags--quarter gram, half gram, gram. But why so much? Ari judged there to be fifty grams total here, or more. Moria Riggins must have been anticipating some brisk trade in product to build up such a hoard. Or had she bought it all at once? Ari had no idea of the street value of cocaine in this country, but what he held in his hands must have involved a substantial capital outlay. Jerry Riggins

could not have been pleased. He had not been pleased, in any event.

No money for Christmas gifts for the boys? Because you bought all this shit?

But Jerry, with what I make at The Shamrock, we'll be able to buy them--

Ari quickly terminated the imaginary conversation between husband and wife. Although it led to the expected conclusion, it was insufficient as a motive. But it certainly provided Jerry with all the motive he needed to threaten the kayakers with a gun.

Which reminded Ari that the day's labors had only started. And he comprehended there were other home necessities he had neglected, such as a broom and dustpan. Better yet, a vacuum cleaner. He still had twenty-five hundred on his credit card. And now, courtesy of Mother and her kayakers, nearly three times that amount in cash--even more, if he could locate a proper fence.

He knew just the man, if he could only find a secure way to contact him.

He tucked the pouch under the counter and carried one of the kitchen chairs into the living room. Placing it against the wall under the register, he was about to step up when he spotted the cat peering around the corner at him.

"Ah, Sphinx, *merci beaucoup*." When he tried to approach, Sphinx retreated to the front door and crouched. "You stay home for a bit. Come in here."

His feet sliding across the flour, Ari went back into the kitchen. At the sound of a can being popped open, Sphinx appeared and emitted a meow of complaint and anticipation. While Ari was scooping food into its dish, Sphinx sniffed at the opening next to the stove.

"I forgive you for keeping secrets from me," Ari said convivially, putting the dish

on the floor. Sphinx shook off some flour and held its nose near the turkey giblets with gravy. First it licked, then began devouring the cat food.

"Excellent. Don't forget where your poop box is."

In the living room, Ari stood on the chair and raised his arms to the register. He did not see any screws. Working his fingernails under the rim, he gave a tug. The register parted easily from the duct opening. Ari flipped it over and noted the spring clamps that held the register in place. No need for a screwdriver.

Taking up the magnet he had gotten at Lowe's, he tested it against the side of the duct. It did not stick. He tied the magnet to the end of the rope and lowered it into the ductwork.

He had played out about ten feet when there was a knock inside the wall near the foot of his chair. He pushed the rope a short way and it slackened. That was as far as he would get. Was it enough?

He drew the rope back slowly. For a moment it seemed heavier than when he had lowered it. Then it suddenly lightened at the same moment he heard the distinctive knock of metal against the ductwork.

It was there, all right. How far was it from the basement duct junction? Several feet? Or mere inches? If he toyed with the magnet any more, the gun--and he was positive now it was a gun--might drop through the gap. He did not know if that would make his task easier or harder, but for now at least he knew where to cut through the sheet rock if he was forced to adopt that option.

It was obvious the magnet was not up to the job. He tied a bungee cord around the end of the rope, with the hook extending. For the next hour, without a break, he

worked the rope back and forth and sideways, trying every conceivable angle as he perched on the chair, like a bell ringer searching for the perfect, almost unachievable pitch. He had resigned himself to battling his way through the wall when, while pulling gently, the rope resisted ever so slightly. He paused, trying to work a kink out of his back, then began to haul in his catch. Mild thudding and scraping accompanied the ascent, but there was no abrupt slack, no violent crash of the gun falling back to the L-joint. When the bungee cord came in sight, Ari stretched as far as he could to catch the gun as it slid out of the cut. An accidental discharge could put a ludicrous end to all his labor.

He pulled. A moment later, he was holding a .38 with a gaudy red handle, identical to the one he had taken from the kayakers--with one exception. This gun contained four spent cartridges—and evidence of drawback effect. He was sure the flecks on the barrel were dried blood.

It was almost noon, but Ari was content. Having considered the possibility that he might have to pound a hole in his wall and cut into the duct, he had reserved the entire day for this task. Now he could focus on other matters.

Upstairs he found Sphinx curled up on his mattress. In the process of cleaning itself off, it had left traces of flour on the blanket. Ari was confronted with the necessity of doing a wash, a domestic chore as mysterious to him as cooking a decent meal.

He sat at the computer and juggled the mouse to bring up the screen. He logged on and checked the news. There had been a particularly costly attack in Baghdad. A suicide bomber had rammed a fuel tanker at a gas station. The resulting explosion had killed over a hundred people. The number of wounded was as yet unknown. Ari

imagined the suffering, the ghastly burns. But what pained him most was how the insurgents imposed a kind of complicity upon innocent bystanders. Iraqis killing Iraqis made the victims as guilty as the killers because they were being used to enforce a vision of futility. Without the dead, there was no cause, only the same meaningless babble that one got from around the globe. And babble could be easily dismissed.

There was no idle babble in the Riggins house. On a scale of one, one individual's death was all that was needed to invoke a cause. Ari had four voices calling to him.

And when he checked his email he found yet more voices calling to him, these from halfway across the Atlantic.

They came via an attachment in one of Sandra's emails. There was no question it was from the deputy, although she did not sign the message and neither the user name nor domain included anything about the U.S. Marshals Service--or any other government entity.

"Baskin-Robbins, Forest Hill, 2 PM. Have what you want, but hoping this will alleviate your boredom. I asked for a better picture, but this was all that was provided."

He clicked on the attachment and drew in his breath.

"My husband, your son is doing well. He is working as a translator for our small community here. He is also taking many classes. You know how eager a student he has always been. As for myself, I am doing well. They have asked me to write this in English. I have never been as adept at languages as yourself, but as you can see, I still have some of my wits left. They treat me well, here. There is no fear. I have been asked to provide a picture. Here I am. Your wife."

He stared at the picture.

His roar of grief and rage sent Sphinx flying. It took every ounce of Ari's willpower not to smash the computer to the floor.

She hasn't forgiven me....

He sent the office chair crashing against the studio wall and stormed blindly through the house, bedroom to basement, flooding the vacant spaces with his despair. He slammed his fists against walls, ripped down the thick curtains of the living room, pounded the kitchen table into a rickety hulk.

It was only when he found himself in Joshua's bedroom that he found the control for his rage. His eyes narrowed on the spot where the boy's bed had been.

Joshua, why were you awake at that late hour? Was it fear that kept your eyes open? Or something else?

He would not know until he saw Sandra.

Downstairs, he found Sphinx crouched next to the front door. Apparently it realized its hiding place had been permanently compromised and understood the only safety lay outdoors. Ari had never paid much attention animal emotions, but Sphinx's terror was painful to see. He leaned down to pet the cat, but it drew back. He nodded, and opened the door. With a keen sense of loss, he watched the animal rocket away into the woods.

At two o'clock, Ari was seated in a strictly functional plastic chair watching a mother two tables down trying to control the ice cream dripping from her four-year-old's cone. He appreciated the friendly, apologetic smile she gave him as she wiped a green

blob off the bright red Formica. It was all the more appreciated for being offered to a lone man, a foreigner, who seemed very much out of place.

What he didn't find so friendly were the wary glances of the high school girl manning the counter. What was he doing here? Why wasn't he ordering?

He studied a bulletin board loaded with 'Have You Seen Me?' flyers. Nearly half of the children pictured had been 'kidnapped' by their own fathers. Ari could not bring himself to take these seriously. Why shouldn't a man take charge of his own children?

For half an hour Ari twisted in the plastic chair. He had noticed similar buttock-cups in many of the American eating establishments he had visited so far. After going to great lengths to attract customers, some restaurants seemed to go out of their way to make them as uncomfortable as possible. He realized this was entirely subjective. The woman and her son did not leave prematurely, nor any of the others who came in, ate and departed while Ari sat mute near the entrance.

Sandra entered breezily, a large courier pouch under her arm.

"You ate already?"

Ari placed his hands on the table. "What you see."

"You don't like ice cream?" Keeping the pouch under her arm, she went to the counter and gazed lovingly down upon the containers of ice cream under the display glass, like a pilot trying to locate a landing field in the fog. She finally chose an off-white ice cream with thick caramel seams. She cocked her head and carried her dessert to the back, out of sight of the counter. Ari stood and followed.

Laying the pouch on the table, Sandra sat and immediately planted her tongue in the ice cream, following it to the crown with the sensuous innocence of a child.

"You don't know what you're missing," she said, smacking her lips.

"I'm not hungry." Ari gave her an impatient look. "If I can just take this--"

"Nuh-uh," Sandra shook her head. "It was hard enough getting copies. It was just as hard getting that email from your wife forwarded. You're super hush-hush, my friend." She cocked her brow. "Are you sure that letter and picture weren't enough? I can imagine you're bored."

"I want that file."

"Okay. It was worth a shot. It took about ten signatures before RPD would hand anything over, including a John Hancock from State. You really are one of their darlings."

"I thought I was here under the auspices of the U.S. Government."

"Well duh, that includes the State Department, which is pretty fuck--" Sandra stopped herself. "Pretty high." She took another tongue-swipe at her cone. "But this is as far as this goes. The RPD gave up a copy, but I have to have it back to them by four."

Ari glanced at his watch. It was almost a quarter to three. "How long will it take you to get this back to the police?"

"Half an hour."

"That gives me very little time. And you were late."

"Couldn't be helped."

Ari took the pouch and unzipped it. Inside was a manila folder that he immediately suspected was too thin by least three-quarters.

"Let's switch seats," Sandra said, seeing a family take up a nearby table. She wanted Ari's back to the wall. He squeezed out of his chair and took her place. He

flipped open the folder and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Sandra asked with mock innocence. "Isn't it what you wanted?"

"These are report forms from Officers Jackson and Mangioni. I've already spoken to them."

"So you told me."

"Where is Detective Carrington's report? Where is the autopsy?"

"Autopsy? You didn't say anything about getting technical. Listen, I jumped through a lot of hoops to get even this much."

Ari glanced through the forms and came up with four spreadsheets.

"Matrix worksheets," said Sandra when he held them up. "One for each victim. Usually they work those up when there's a legitimate suspect. Compare the suspect's story against the evidence. There's no suspect, but this will come in handy if they nab someone."

Nothing varied from what the two policemen had told him. Saturation stains, the positions of the victims, the extensive spatter patterns indicative of death at close range. Everything consistent with the thin gruel of police theory, lethal harm inflicted by person or persons unknown. It was grotesquely meager.

"'Ghosting pattern'..." said Ari.

"That's a gap in a splatter pattern."

"You mean, no blood where you would expect blood."

"Right. Sometimes you can see the outline of the killer from the back-spatter on the wall. Sort of like leaving a stencil of himself. A lot more spooky, though."

"There was an indication of a ghosting pattern on Joshua's clothing."

“That means someone lifted something off the poor boy after he was shot.”

“I see...” Ari paused. “There is no indication of spatter on any of their sleeves,” he mused out loud.

“Why should there be?” Sandra crunched through the last bite of her sugar cone, obviously aware of his growing agitation. She stood. “I want to try some pistachio.”

Ari was able to finish the very brief--too brief--reports while she was at the counter. He closed the folder and thrust it angrily into the pouch. The back of his hand brushed against something rough inside and he widened the pouch. There was another zipper. He opened it. At first he saw nothing, but when he reached inside his fingers encountered a small square that felt like plastic. He removed it quickly and tucked it into his shirt pocket. He zipped up the inside pocket as Sandra turned the corner and took up her seat.

“I’m pleased to see that you’re not chewing gum today.”

“I didn’t want to risk getting my jaw broken,” she said with a scowl before digging her tongue into the green mass atop her cone. Ari did not see much improvement over the gum.

“This report gives me less information than the newspapers. I want to see the chief investigator’s report, the coroner’s report, the pictures, the toxicology report.”

“In your dreams.” Sandra wiped away a small green moustache with the back of her hand. “What were you overseas, anyway? Some kind of CSI guy?”

“I was with Special Security,” Ari said after a moment’s thought.

“That sounds like a cheap comic book!” Sandra laughed disparagingly, then resumed working on her cone.

"Is it the city police who are withholding this information, or is it you?"

"I've done all I can," Sandra answered with surprising earnestness.

"Why would they do that?"

"You mean why would they want to withhold confidential files from a complete stranger who has nothing to do with the investigation? Why would they withhold evidence from someone who might be a foreign agent?"

"What did you tell them about me?"

"Actually, nothing," Sandra sighed. "But that's how they'd react if they knew. As it stands, they don't like the Marshals Service butting its nose into their business. It's a Federal-local thing."

"You mean like the interdepartmental rivalry that allowed the September 11 attacks to happen."

Sandra blushed. "Well, that was more Federal-Federal, actually. But it's the same principle."

"I understand," said Ari. And he did, all too well. "But I find myself asking why certain items have been excluded. For example, the officers' reports make no mention of what the neighbors heard that day and night."

"They didn't hear anything."

"That's not true. The day of the murders there was a tremendous row just before nightfall."

"At the Riggins house?"

"Yes. Their neighbor, Howie Nottoway, claims not to have heard it, but I believe he had a front row seat."

"What do you think it means?"

"That the back door to the Riggins house was smashed in at that time."

"That doesn't make any sense." Sandra gave a startled jerk. "I mean, the news said they were murdered around midnight."

"One of them was." Ari leaned forward. "That is why the toxicology report is all-important. I need to know--"

"Which one of them was killed at midnight?"

"One of the parents."

"And the others? Before or after? It couldn't be five in the evening. The coroner wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"Soon before the parent was killed. I've done some informal timing of kayakers on the river during the day. They must go much more slowly at night, and since sound carries so far at that time--"

"I suppose you know you've totally lost me."

Ari nodded, as though with nervous excitement. Sandra now knew as much as she needed to know. And so did he. Her eagerness and her annoyance betrayed her interest in a case over which she had zero jurisdiction. He splayed his fingers across the table in a display of self-control.

"I've said enough. This is idle speculation on my part." He nodded at the pouch. "With so little information, how can I reach any conclusions?"

"Right..." Sandra did not look convinced. "You know...if you found out something by chance...I mean about Moria and her family..."

Moria....

"I mean, maybe this copy is incomplete because there's something personal about them in the report and the police don't think it's relevant."

"Something that might besmirch their good name?"

"Where did you say you learned your English?" Sandra waved the question away. "They were killed. All of them. It was unfair. Even worse, it was totally unexpected. Every family has its secrets, and maybe they had some..."

"They did not have the opportunity to brush up their image for posterity."

"Yeah..." Sandra practically jumped forward. "But that doesn't mean there was anything--"

"This censorship doesn't surprise me. There are very few places on earth where 'freedom of speech' exists in fact as well as theory. Your country isn't one of them."

"Like where you come from?"

"Iraq, Ms. Sandra. Iraq."

"Keep your voice down," Sandra hissed.

"Saying what was in your mind in Iraq was a very dangerous proposition."

"Until we came."

"Before, we worried about government informers. Now we worry about everyone. Is that the meaning of democracy, Ms. Sandra? Everyone has the right to inform on the other? Is that little child over there going to run screaming to the authorities if she overhears my conversation?"

"Only if you patted her on the head, too," said Sandra, exaggerating a point to disprove it.

"Really?" Ari said, surprised. "Why?"

"What? The patting? Are you kidding? You'd be a pervert."

"But she's only a girl."

"Exactly."

"But...of course, if she was a young lady, I wouldn't think of it." Ari was momentarily stumped. "But a child?"

"You're not a friend or relative. If you touched her in any way everybody here would damn straight report you."

"Amazing. And if my wife..."

"Same thing." Sandra leaned forward and lowered her voice. "That little business with the gum would've landed anyone else in jail for a few nights, believe you me. I'dve liked nothing better than to see you..." Sandra sat back, deciding she had made her point.

Ari dwelled on this for several moments.

"Drawing profound conclusions?" Sandra asked.

"Not very profound. Only that it seems that it is the bitter and self-hating countries that go to war against each other."

"You're comparing the U.S. to Iraq?" Sandra crumpled the empty paper sleeve that had held her cone, took up the pouch, and stood. "I was told to vet that email from your wife for any hidden codes. You know what I saw? Nothing. And I mean *nothing*. 'Hi hubby. Everything's fine. Your wife.' Boy, you could bury the Manhattan Project in all that lovey-dovey, without even a 'wish you were here'. How do you even know that *was* your wife under that gook suit you make your women wear?"

"An abaya and niqab," said Ari lowly. Sandra was not looking at his eyes. If she had, she would have stopped.

"You couldn't even see her eyes! No thanks. You see me, you see what you get. I'm going. Don't send any more crappy demands to your boys on the glass ceiling. I'm not doing you any more favors."

She turned and stormed down the length of the ice cream parlor, ignoring the bemused glances of parents and children. This was the last place they would have expected to see a domestic spat.

Ari followed her into the parking lot. Hearing him behind her, Sandra turned, saw the killer in his eyes, and dropped the pouch. Ari easily parried her kick and used her own leg to vault her to the ground. He grabbed her by the scruff as she began to roll away.

"You listen!" he shouted.

"What," she gasped. "You're going to kill me with a sob story? I don't want to hear--"

He gripped the back of her small neck and lifted. She was a toy.

"Don't do this," she said. "Someone will call--"

He whirled her around. She brought up a knee and he knocked it aside. Taking her under the chin, he slammed her against a black SUV and raised her off her feet. His fingers dug into the fine bones of her jaw.

"Are you listening to me?"

He nodded her head for her.

"Do you hear?"

He repeated her nod.

"Excellent. Because you must understand, if you speak disrespectfully of my

wife again, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

He nodded for her.

"Your masters have not fully informed you of the situation, or else you would not have spewed such filth. Yes?"

He forced another nod.

"My wife is the most beautiful woman in the world. Wouldn't you agree?"

A vigorous nod.

"She never before wore the abaya and niqab. She is a devout believer, the best woman, the most wonderful mother, but she did not feel the need to hide her beauty, for which I thank God daily. Don't you thank God?"

Nod.

"Choking..." Sandra's protest was a harsh squeak.

He squeezed her mandible harder. He felt her jaw hinge shift.

"You are not speaking, Ms. Sandra. Your words are filth. Can you still hear me?"

Nod.

"When the Americans invaded my country, they used many CBU's. Do you know what those are?"

He shook her head for her.

"Cluster-bomb units with anti-personnel submunitions. They contain hundreds of bomblets. The bomblets are indiscriminate and scatter across a wide area. To children they look like toys. Many children tried to play with these toys. They were either killed or maimed by the thousands. By the thousands, Ms. Sandra. Would any civilized nation

use a weapon such as this?"

A vigorous shake of the head.

"I agree. Only savages with peasants for leaders would employ such things. My eldest boy was killed by a bomb. But he died on the field of battle, honorably and heroically, while trying to blow up one of the machines you sent to conquer us. Isn't that magnificent?"

Nod. Then another nod. Then another.

"My youngest son was at home with his mother and my middle son. He went outside to play. He saw a bomblet. He thought it was a toy. His mother saw what was about to happen and raced out to save him. But it was too late. He was killed in the explosion. And my wife...my wife...would you like to know what happened to my wife?"

Sandra's feet were well off the ground. When he nodded for her, her head thudded loudly against the window of the SUV.

"Yes! You want to know!"

More concussive nodding.

"She was wounded grievously in the explosion. Do you want to know how badly she was injured?"

Nod. Thud. Nod. Thud.

"Her left arm was completely taken off. Whoosh! A miracle, a vanishing act! Her chest was filled with shrapnel. What remained of her breasts was cut away by the surgeon. Isn't that terrible. Don't you weep at this?"

Nod. Thud.

"Oh. Are you dying? I'm so sorry. But let me finish my 'sob' story. Do you want

to know why my wife now wears the holy garment that hides her face and eyes? Yes?

Then listen, you filth. It is because my wife no longer has a face! She has no eyes! She has no face! She has no eyes! She is hidden forever! You filthy..."

Ari let go. Sandra dropped to the pavement.

SIXTEEN

They were not fifty yards beyond the wire when there was a loud metallic rap on the side of the Bradley. The men on the benches jerked. They knew the sound all too well.

The private seated next to Ghaith had not even properly settled in. Like all the other members of the squad, he had been uneasy around the translator ever since the day he had publicly removed his balaclava after chasing down the IP impersonators and gone postal in the middle of one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the entire country. If they had been a little nervous around him when his face was hidden, they were practically crossed-eyed with the willies now that the mask was off. While Ghaith was no Hunchback of Notre Dame, an unhooded collaborator stood out like a four star general in any AO. It was like having some guy wearing a 'shoot me' Post-it on his back in a ballroom filled with homicidal maniacs, and anyone standing near him was bound to become the collateral catch of the day. The private next to Ghaith in the fighting vehicle did not want to be rubbing thighs with Bad Ass Luck in the flesh, and was trying to put some air between him and the translator when the first bullet struck.

While the insurgents occasionally heaved a mortar shell or 122-mm rocket inside the fort, no one expected an ambush this close to the FOB, where the Americans could call in fire support and reinforcements within seconds.

But when the men in the Bradley heard a second ping, then a whole string of them, and then someone outside shouting, "RPG!", they knew this movie was real.

Sometimes the Bradley imparted a sense of security. At other times it seemed nothing better than a trap in which every man inside would be roasted. It was ideal while bullets were flying, but rocket propelled grenades were another matter.

A rattle like a train on broken ties shook the vehicle. Staff Sergeant Henley was blasting away with the coax. The firing stopped when he and Captain Rodriguez ducked down in the turret. A nearby explosion threw the men on one bench forward into the laps of the men across from them. Ghaith pushed a frightened soldier back into his seat.

The Bradley halted. The driver was smacking his headset. He had lost contact with Rodriguez. It was SOP for the driver to stop when the intercom link was broken. Rodriguez squeezed around to talk to the driver, probably to order him to continue forward. Then he saw the Humvee in front of them burning and swore. He alerted brigade TOC.

"Contact left! AK's, PKM's, RPG's! We are engaging!"

Whoosh...!

"Contact right! Staff Sergeant, get back on that coax!"

The Bradley again shuddered under the hammering of the M240C. The counterpoint of bullets hitting the vehicle's armor slackened but did not stop entirely.

The captain leaned down and yelled. The men on the benches couldn't hear him, but the driver did. He twisted around in his seat and shouted, "Gitfo!"

As soon as the ramp dropped the two men at the back got the fuck out. Taking advantage of the coaxial's curtain of fire, they ran to the wrecked Humvee behind them to check for survivors. Ghaith could see that the Bradley was neatly boxed in, with Humvees on fire forward and back.

There was a pause, then two more men dashed out, including the private so adverse to rubbing shoulders with Ghaith, who silently wished him luck. A dat-dat-dat of automatic gunfire sent the private scurrying out of sight.

As Ghaith took his turn down the ramp he spotted two dead men near an alley entrance. Although their heads had been swathed in kuffiah scarves, Ghaith noted a red beret peaking out of one of them.

Bastards....

There were two more explosions, very close. Heads appeared on rooftops and it sounded like two dozen Russian-made automatic rifles going off all at once. The man who had emerged with Ghaith screamed and fell. Ghaith used the man's vest as a handhold and hauled him towards an open door, where a soldier ('Four Fingers of Death' Ropp, of all people) was beckoning him. Ghaith stumbled and the wounded man went down. From the look of his leg wound, he deserved to howl. Then Ropp was next to them. He slung the man's carbine over his shoulder, and together they managed to drag-and-carry the man to the building.

Sergeant Mastin came pounding downstairs, two men behind him. Seeing the wounded man, he came over and gave him a cursory inspection.

"Put some pressure on that wound, soldier," he told Ropp. He gave the wounded man a pat on the shoulder. "You got some first class buddy aide. Hooa."

"Hooa," the wounded man gasped.

While Mastin keyed his hand mike, another soldier crouched next to Ropp to fill him in.

"The house is clear. There's no sign of a bomb."

Ghaith understood this to mean the house had not been booby-trapped to explode when enough Americans seeking cover came through the door. A rather neat trick, in his opinion, although he would not have been so appreciative had the room blown up under his feet.

Pressing down on the injured soldier's wound, Ropp said, "The Fedayeen aren't going to blow the place up if they're standing on the roof."

"Yeah..."

"What the fuck are they doing, hitting us so close to the wire?"

"Making a point, I guess."

"What point?"

"That they can hit us this close to the wire, what d'ya think?"

Ghaith thought there was more to it than that.

He knew he was taking a risk when he took up the wounded man's M-4. The soldiers were fully aware that more than one Iraqi working for the invaders had suddenly turned a gun on his American employers. Seeing him pick up a loose carbine in the middle of a firefight might prompt Mastin to shoot him on the spot, no questions asked. So Ghaith went for his only refuge: the street.

He paused at the door. He noted an odd, orange splash of color on the reactive armor of the Bradley he had left only the minute before. New and bright, it was no military emblem. More like the kind of splatter left behind when someone threw a balloon filled with paint.

The Bradley had been marked out.

Captain Rodriguez had never seen a stand-up fight like this outside of maneuvers at Fort Hood. He had heard of soldiers going toe-to-toe with the enemy in 2003, but since then the foe had switched to less costly tactics. Rodriguez had dealt mainly with IED's and the occasional sniper. Chasing down a hot Q36 radar hit might result in a brief firefight with a carful of insurgents, but otherwise he spent his days trying to bond with the natives and cleaning up after car bombs. This was a whole new level. This was just...great. The enemy had come out into the open, in spades. He had spotted at least two dozen men shooting down at them from the rooftops, and from the intensity of the fire he suspected a lot more. But he could not be cheerful. The Humvees blocking his path had reported half a dozen wounded.

Staff Sergeant Henley behaved as though he did not have a care in the world. In between bursts from the coax, he bellowed, "I love being attached to III Corps, sir!"

Rodriguez gave him a skeptical look and tried not to laugh. Then he pressed his hand beneath his CVC helmet and swore. "We've got friendlies coming up the road from the fort."

During the next few minutes he was totally preoccupied with the net, contacting his platoon leaders and the S-3, as well as calling up the 9 Line for a medevac. It took him a while to realize that, while the enemy fire had intensified, none of it was directed at the Bradley.

Henley noticed this, too. "Something screwy's going on, sir. Oh shit—"

An Iraqi policeman had dashed across the street and up the ramp of the Bradley.

"Suicide bomber!"

Rodriguez swore at the Bradley driver, who couldn't hear him because of the

broken comm link. Ducking inside, he confronted the wide-eyed policeman and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw he was not strapped with explosives. The policeman began talking rapidly to the captain, who nodded and tried to recall his social protocol. Should he kiss the Iraqi for not being a terrorist? He turned to the driver.

“Why is that ramp open?”

“I thought we should provide cover—“

“Forget it,” Rodriguez said. The Iraqi cop was giving him a headache with all his frantic gesturing. “Where’s Haji?”

“The interpreter, sir?” The driver grunted as he turned around in his seat and peered at the empty benches. “I guess he’s gone Elvis, sir.”

“Captain Rodriguez!” Henley called down from the turret. “I think you should come see this, sir!”

Rodriguez told the driver to keep an eye on the Iraqi cop, then squeezed back into the turret.

“Take a look over there.” Henley pointed to the right of the Humvee burning behind them. “I think we’ve got a red-on-red situation.”

Red-on-red was the tactical version of divide and conquer. Whenever Coalition troops encountered opposing factions of Iraqis engaged in a firefight between themselves, they tried to turn it to their advantage. Often this meant just sitting back and watching Iraqis kill each other. If it was Sunnis against Shias, they would join in on whichever side Washington favored that month. And the Americans would jump in on the side of anybody who was beating up on al-Qaeda.

But what Rodriguez saw now looked more like a grand-scale assassination

attempt than a typical red-on-red fracas. Their Iraqi translator was skittering back and forth on the street, using every crumb of cover while the entire weight of the ambush exploded around him. He would fire a round at a window or rooftop, duck for a moment as he timed his next move, then pop behind a cement mixer or half-filled HESCO cell left over from construction of the fort. Rodriguez fumed at the way soldiers scrambled to get out of his path whenever they saw him coming their way. They had quickly comprehended that they were not the main target. Not this time, at least. He was only mildly relieved when he heard a scream and turned to see an enemy combatant being blown out a window. Blue Platoon was working its way through the buildings from behind and forcing a mass eviction. Henley had seen this, too, and laughed.

“They got the fobbits in action!”

The translator stood and aimed the carbine at another bobbing head. There was no puff of smoke. He was out of ammo. But a moment later he jumped up and pretended to squeeze off another round.

“Man, is that whistling in the dark or what?” said Henley.

“Staff Sergeant, why aren’t you firing your weapon?”

“The Apaches are coming, sir. I can hear them.”

“So?”

“Yes, sir!” And Henley resumed firing the coax.

Rodriguez would have run out himself to help the translator, but Henley was right. The Apaches were coming, and he wanted Blue out of the upper stories so that it would not get hit by any 30-mm rounds that might pierce the roofs. But as he concentrated on the net, he spotted a private—was it Ropp?—making a mad dash across

the road towards the translator's latest position. He seemed to be carrying spare ammunition clips.

Silence fell over the block when the attack helicopters were finished. Rodriguez started taking the Green 2 and found that as bad as things had seemed, they could have been a lot worse. He had twelve men wounded, one seriously, and two dead Humvees, but that was it. Even the interpreter had survived.

When he had a moment to spare he walked over to Ghaith, who was seated next to Ropp. They were sharing laughs and unheated all-beef franks. Ropp stood and saluted.

"At ease." He smiled at the soldier and the civilian. "That was a helluva show you two put on."

"We aim to please, sir," Ropp beamed.

"Yes..." The captain turned to Ghaith. "And you, Haji, are one helluva lucky man. If I didn't know better, I would've thought this attack was staged just for your benefit. But there must be over a dozen dead Fedayeen lying around here. No man is worth that kind of price."

Ghaith smiled politely.

"You mind telling me who you really are?" Rodriguez asked. "You're under no obligation to tell me, of course. I can only assume you've already been vetted, since battalion sent you down to me. But to be quite honest, once you were out in the open, every gun was trained on you."

"Perhaps that was because I was out in the open," Ghaith reasoned.

"Captain Rodriguez!" Staff Sergeant Henley had clambered down the Bradley

and was frowning at the orange splotch on the side of the vehicle. “We got some bodacious bird shit here, sir!”

The captain stared at the mark. “Son of a bitch.”

“Captain!” a soldier on a nearby rooftop called down. “These camelwonks are wearing red berets under their head blankets, sir! I think—“

“Roger that!” the captain shouted, growing angrier by the second. With wrathful amazement he turned on Ghaith. “Do you know who those men are?”

“Why...” Ghaith smiled at the captain, then at Ropp, who had backed away from the captain to finish off his last hot dog. Ropp looked surprised, and shrugged.

“Insurgents, right?”

“I think Haji here knows better,” said Rodriguez.

“I believe this is a cadre from the Wolf Brigade, Captain Rodriguez,” Ghaith sighed.

“That doesn’t surprise you?”

“It’s not surprising that men under the command of Abu Walid, a good Shiite general, would be shooting at an alleged Sunni collaborating with the Americans. No, not at all.”

“So, you’re Sunni.”

“I was a clerk under a Sunni administrator,” Ghaith responded. “That’s all.”

“Never seen a clerk with balls like that!” Ropp barked. He winced, and added, “Sir.”

“Neither have I, private.” The captain’s eyes narrowed. “The Wolf Brigade. That’s the Iraqi unit that fought alongside us at Mosul. These are our allies. Yet they

marked my Bradley just to get at you. Don't deny it—it's plain as the nose on your face."

"I wouldn't worry about them," said Ghaith. "You can always find more assassins."

"What?"

"The Wolf Brigade. You use them to assassinate undesirables. They allow the Americans to keep their hands clean."

"What the fuck...I mean, sir, is that true?"

Rodriguez threw an irritated glance at Ropp, then came up toe-to-toe with Ghaith. "My friend, I think you need a little R&R in the Green Zone."

Only a few miles from the Baskin-Robbins, Ari saw the entrance to a park and turned in. There was nobody else there, which was not surprising. On one side was a sterile-looking chain link fence that separated the park from Powhite Parkway, on the other a threadbare patch of woods through which Ari could see the back of a \$1.99 laundry. Half of the clearing was taken up by the lane and parking lot. There were no amenities, there was no playground, and the two rotting benches looked unwholesomely fragile. With nowhere to jog or commune with nature, it was an ideal dumping ground for dispirited souls.

He did not get out of the xB. He sat and allowed his tears to wash out quickly and efficiently. When that was done, he sent a mental fireman to investigate the gutted remnant of Ari Ciminon, extinguishing glowing embers with morbid ease, until all that was left was a dark and murky cavern.

But the ache would not leave. Perhaps he could have dismissed it, as he had done

his rage and remorse. Yet he was familiar with the pain. It was, in fact, his only companion. And now that he had damned himself with his actions, it might be the only friend he would ever have.

While driving away from the ice cream parlor, he had seen customers old and young watching him in horror. At least one of them held a cell phone to her ear. And the wary young girl behind the counter would have already called the police. But the police were the least of his concerns. It was the U.S. Marshal who would come after him, pinpointing him with the LoJack and storming his little Scion with vengeful precision. He would not try to avoid arrest and repatriation--and certain death. But what would happen to his wife and son? Would their new adoptive land evict them? Would they be hustled off on the first plane to Baghdad? It was horrifyingly possible that he had condemned them, too.

And the Riggins family? They would go unavenged. There seemed no great urgency to solve the crime, in any event. Their deaths were a statistical nullity compared to the murder rate in his own country. Now Ari's sense of mission, adopted out of boredom as much as through any desire for justice, would result in the death of his own line. This had been the fate of all too many of his countrymen who had stood up to Saddam. Entire families wiped out. The Americans insisted such things did not happen in their land of plenty. Or if they did, it was due to unsavory foreigners on their soil, or through some bizarre concatenation of unlikely events resulting from aberrant behavior.

What jokers.

It was true that Ari felt safer here, that it was highly unlikely that a car parked next to him would explode or that someone would approach him in friendly greeting

before yanking the cord on a suicide vest. But he sensed an underlying fear in this society. Like when he was a kid, and Omar aimed a rubber band at his face. The dread of being shot was almost as bad as being shot. Americans went in constant fear of that stretched and poised rubber band.

Of course, if he had a choice of fears, he would choose the place where that rubber band was least likely to be released. America was probably a good place to raise a family. A good place to survive in. After all, that was why he was here.

Then why did he take out after Sandra that way? Even before he had attacked her, he had egged her on with criticisms and false comparisons. Was it because she represented so much that was smug and intellectually vacuous? She had crossed the line when she spoke of his wife that way. But was it his fault that she had gone too far?

Rana. With her he had balanced his fortunes, discussed options, shared risks. Ari had enough ambition for a dozen men, so there was no need for his wife to play Lady Macbeth. But he missed the dance of her eyes whenever he made a veiled reference to a course of action or a momentous decision. They could not speak openly, of course. There was the risk that even his house was bugged. A top-level general and his mistress had been tortured and executed, and the general's entire family eliminated, when his pillow-talk strayed to Saddam Hussein's bastard origins. Yet it was astonishing how much Ari and Rana could convey without words, and how little was misunderstood.

Had she been by his side now, she would not have needed eyes which were now gone or a voice that was now silenced. Her simple, profound presence would have nipped his anger in the bud. Whenever he had felt wrathful toward one of his sons (even the best of boys could find a way to draw one's ire), Rana's gentle shadow nearly always

subdued him.

His cell phone rang. Ari leaned sideways and removed it from his pocket. He opened it. The number was unfamiliar. The Marshal or the police? Either might call to ask him to come in voluntarily, saving them the trouble and expense of arraying the might of the state against him.

"Ciminon," he finally answered.

A strange, croaking whisper came out of the tiny speaker.

"Hello?" said Ari.

"No...charges..."

"Ms. Sandra?"

"Yes."

"Where are you calling from?"

"The...hospital. Where the fuck...do you think?"

"I'm glad to see you're still alive." And he was. He hadn't been sure.

"I called them off." Her constricted voice was filled with pain.

"The police?"

"Everyone. Told them...never mind."

A lovers' quarrel.

"Then pulled my weight. Showed them...my credentials..."

Sandra pulling her weight. Ari found himself smiling.

"Listen, Ms. Sandra...I'm sorry--"

"Shut the fuck up. I shouldn't have...I didn't know..."

"I understand," said Ari.

"Do you? If you were arrested...you'd..."

So this wasn't a kiss-and-make-up call. Sandra was concerned that he would tell a court-appointed lawyer some dirt about Jerry and Moria Riggins. The lawyer would blackmail the prosecution into a plea bargain. Ari had seen enough American movies to understand the arrangement.

"Mr. Ciminon...?"

"Yes?"

"I...don't see any good reason...why you should be helping the U.S., after all that happened..."

"This is the only way that I can save what little I have left," said Ari, and left it at that.

"All right. But why--"

"I have nothing more to say on that subject."

"And I shouldn't be asking, anyway," said Sandra quietly. After a pause, she asked, "Do you think...you can find the killers? I mean, of the Riggins family?"

Ari was surprised by her openness. He nodded, as though she could see him. Then he said, "I think so."

"Good," said Sandra, then disconnected.

In the Electronics department of the Forest Hill Wal-Mart Ari tried to invoke the assistance of a clerk, who stared at him as though he had just jumped out of a fish bowl.

"You want to buy a computer?" the clerk said.

"Inexpensive but efficient," Ari responded.

"Well, sir, we don't go into computers in a big way. I mean, not in the stores. We've got some bundle packages on our website. HP, Dell, good names like that. But...I guess you need a computer to go online and buy them. We've only got a few things here..."

"But?"

"Well, they're cheap enough."

Ari was aware that 'cheap' was a double-edged sword. "Are you suggesting that I go somewhere else?"

"We've got a Toshiba laptop that's pretty good. Uh...but...have you tried Circuit City or Comp USA or Best Buy? They might have something better on their shelf, if you need something right away. Well, not better. Just more powerful."

"That sounds better."

"It depends on how you want it configured. You want XP? Are you going to be doing a lot of downloads? How much RAM are you going to want? If this is for business, you'll need a good processor for your bandwidth. I hear Intel's 2 Quad core is good. It can chop right through the threads."

Ari felt himself droop as the young man droned on. So much for his splendid English. He felt as stupefied here as he had at Lowe's when confronted by the arcana of home improvement. The clerk's eyes had glazed over as he paraded his expertise, and so did Ari's. The two of them looked like a hypnotist and his subject, only both had gone under and there was no one around to snap them out of their trance.

The clerk stopped talking. The men stood stupidly for a moment, then shook themselves awake.

"To tell you the truth," said Ari, "I don't need it for anything extensive. I just want to use it to send an email and for a little research.

"An email," the clerk said, dumbfounded by the singular indefinite article. "Why not just go to the library, then?"

"Excuse me?"

"There's public libraries all over the place."

"They would have a computer that I can use?"

"Sure. Some of them hardly have books anymore. Just terminals."

"Excellent. Thank you."

Ari had already noted three libraries, one within jogging distance, the other two about fifteen minutes away by car. The Westover Hills branch of the Richmond Public Library looked so much like a residence that Ari had wondered if he misunderstood the sign. He suspected it had limited resources, and in any event it was too close to home. The main city library on Franklin Street looked sufficient, even grand, but Ari found it uncomfortably close to Carrington's base of operations. That left Henrico County's Tuckahoe Library, just off Parham Road, which he had seen during his drive out to Moria's Notions. Spacious and new, it held out the promise of giving Ari everything he needed--for free.

The librarian at the front desk directed him downstairs, where he found two long rows of computer workstations, plus numerous terminals tucked away in odd corners. They all seemed to be occupied.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait your turn," the harried woman at the reference desk

told him. "It's first come, first serve, with a two-hour limit. You have a library card?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I can issue you a temporary one."

"With my name and address?"

For the first time the reference librarian gave him a good look. Noting his suit and neat appearance, she seemed to conclude he was not a homeless good-for-nothing.

"Do you live in the Richmond area?"

"I'm...visiting."

"Then I'll issue you a Visitor's Card when a workstation is free. I'm afraid that's only good for one hour."

"That's perfectly adequate. Thank you so much."

Ari put a name on the waiting list, then wandered through the book stacks. He noted several new titles about the war in Iraq, including *State of Denial*, *Cobra II*, *Assassins' Gate* and *Hubris*. After flipping through some of the books, he concluded the general theme was summarized by one particular title: *Fiasco*. Ari shrugged mentally. All wars were fiascos. He'd lived through three of them.

He passed a table around which sat three teenage girls. They could barely suppress their giggles as they flipped through the pages of the oversized volume in front of them. Ari drew a book at random from the bookshelf and sat at a nearby desk.

"Can you believe?" one girl was saying.

"That can't be Mr. Wilson. I mean, this guy's like totally bald!"

"It's him, Shirley."

"Oh gawd, you mean he's wearing a wig now? But he's a hunk!"

"Well he's a baldy hunk under that rug."

"How about Colonel Kramer? My sister told me they had a total dripwad teaching English when she was a junior..."

Ari glanced down at the book he had selected. Ancient Mesopotamia. He stood and returned the book to the shelf. He went back to the reference desk.

"I'm sorry, no terminal is available yet," said the harried librarian.

"I wanted to inquire about something else. Do you have books here put out by the schools? I mean as mementoes, with pictures of the students and teachers?"

"You mean yearbooks?"

"That sounds right."

"We carry some of the local schools."

"Freeman High School."

"Oh yes," the librarian smiled. "We have them going back thirty years. It's just down the road from here. I graduated from there myself before going off to Mary Baldwin."

"And where would the yearbooks be?"

"Against the back wall behind the reference section."

"Ah..." Ari turned left and right.

"I can show you." She asked her coworker to take her place for a moment, then led Ari down an aisle behind her desk. She wore a plain white sweater and a blue skirt. Her loafers gave her a flatfooted stride that verged on the gawky. Her dishwater blonde hair fell straight to her shoulders. She seemed pleased to take this little recess among the shelves. Perhaps she had once dreamed of spending her days among books, only to find

herself in a bleak landscape of pixels and geeks. "Here you are," she said on reaching the back of the room. "Was there any particular year you were interested in?"

"Nineteen-ninety-two."

"That's the year I graduated!" She went straight to the yearbook in question and pulled it down from the shelf. "I haven't looked at this in ages."

"Everyone who graduated that year is in here?" Ari asked.

"Everyone, period. It's divided by classes. See? The freshmen get these tiny portraits and the seniors have these larger, formal ones, with the sophomores and juniors in between. Who are you looking for?"

"I'm trying to find an old friend."

"Oh." The librarian wore no lipstick and had only a watch for jewelry, yet she possessed a strange (if flat) grace. "Your English is very refined," she said, blushing.

Ari gave her a long look. "University of Baghdad," he answered.

"Really? Well, your teacher was first-rate." She ventured a naughty moue.

"Even if he forgot to include 'yearbook' in your vocabulary."

"Yes. Professor Yahya Abdallah."

Arrested on suspicion of espionage. Ari learned later that the charges were trumped up. The professor had made a mildly disparaging remark about the regime to a Brit reporter, who had turned around and spiced up the quote into borderline treason before broadcasting it on BBC World. The professor had died in prison.

The librarian rested the yearbook on a narrow table and backed away reluctantly. With a small gesture, Ari invited her to join him. She smiled and shook her head. "I have to get back to the reference desk. Someone's sure to have locked up by now." Her

smile took a wan downward turn. "I've become more of a hacker than a librarian."

Ari quickly found Moria Massington's picture in the senior section of the yearbook. 'Youthful freshness' described the portrait with fair accuracy. Could he ascribe that simmering gleam in her eyes to simple teenage buoyancy? Or was there something else behind that knowing look. According to Tina, Moria had only been using product for a couple of years.

You could see the future in Moria's eyes. But which future?

There it was, in print, right under her name:

'Our Moria. What can we say? She can charm a moonbeam off the Moon.

Aspires to a degree in Business. Shop at Moria's in 4 years!'

Considering this was the year she had graduated, Moria had undoubtedly possessed an identical copy of the 1992 yearbook. Was it surrounded by the signatures of her friends? Did it contain shy little notes from boys in love with her?

Ari turned to the index. Moria was listed four times, more than most of her peers. There was no listing for Jerry Riggins. He had gone to a different school. Nor did he see Tina Press. Perhaps she had also gone to a different high school. Or she could have married and kept her husband's last name after they split--an assumption based on Tina's invitation to share her bed with him. He went to the next listing for Moria.

Senior Prom. Moria, dressed like a princess, standing beside a strapping young man in a tux.

'Don and Moria outsparkle the stars at the annual bash. Is there more to this than tripping the light fantastic?'

Don. Ari rifled through the senior class and found Donald Bland.

'Don's going places, no doubt about it. Where will we see him next? On the Moon?'

Ari grunted. The yearbook editor had moon dust on the brain. If Don had gone places, Moria had not followed. She had ended up roughly where she began.

He found the next listing, a photograph of some kind of school club. Moria was the only standout in a drab lot. Ari read the caption:

'Esperanto rules!'

He chuckled, then flipped to the final listing. A pyramid of six cheerleaders standing firm for the camera, with Moria at the apex. He looked closely at one of the girls beneath her:

Tina.

You met Moria at the shopping mall, Tina? Why did you lie about that?

He looked more closely at the picture, twisting his head in an impossible attempt to see beyond the pompoms.

He sat back and closed his eyes.

All the old Rebels of '92 will miss you. Remember the pyramid?

Moria had one sterling quality that almost made up for her grievous faults: she knew how to maintain a friendship.

"Mr. Aladdin? There's a workstation free now." The librarian was drawn over to the table by Ari's smile. "You found your friend?" She glanced down and saw the cheerleader pyramid. She seemed disappointed. "Oh. Her. Are you a reporter? You could have told me. Anyone can look at this."

"You're speaking about...?"

"Moria Massington. At least that's the name I knew her by."

"You knew her?"

"I would see her in the hallway at school. That was long ago."

"An eternity."

The librarian blushed and smiled. "It is when you're a woman and thirty." She cocked her head, then reached down to the yearbook and turned back to the senior section. "Here. You can see I didn't exactly belong in Moria's crowd."

Ari found himself looking at a young girl in a formal gown who was painfully aware of her unbecoming acne. He mused over the picture for a moment, then raised his head.

"And now you've blossomed into a radiant vision."

Her blush deepened. "Do they really talk like that where you come from?"

"When we mean it," Ari said.

The librarian looked over her shoulder, as though convinced he was speaking to someone else. "Oh dear. I think I'd better get you to that computer, Mr. Aladdin." Then she gave him a jovial reprimand: "If that's really your name."

"I can show you my lamp."

"Oh dear!"

She hastened out of the reference stacks with Ari close behind her. She showed him to one of the atrium workstations, next to a young man seated at the end of the row who hunched close to his monitor when the librarian shot him a look. She gave Ari a temporary user name and password, tossed another warning glance at the young man, and returned to the reference desk.

Ari logged on and brought out the 2 gigabyte SanDisk that he had taken from Sandra's courier pouch. He inserted it into the tower's SD slot and waited. Nothing happened. He opened the directory menu and clicked on the F drive. After a moment, the screen filled with thumbnail views of jpg files.

It was the Riggins crime scene.

He wanted to see the pictures in the sequence in which they were taken. He clicked on the 'details' button. The thumbnails vanished and he clicked on 'date modified'. Slowly, he worked his way down the list.

01:01:34 12/24/2005: The back door, smashed in. Judging by the time indicator on the bottom right hand of the screen, the CSI photographer began snapping pictures around forty minutes after Jackson and Mangioni radioed in. Ari did not know if this was evidence of efficiency or the reverse. There were very few murder investigations in Baghdad these days. The most detailed were those performed by Americans whenever Americans were accused of murdering innocent Iraqi civilians.

01:02:04 12/24/2005: The back door again, from a slightly different angle.

01:04:56 12/24/2005: The back door from inside the house. Someone had to have swept up the broken wood that must have littered the hallway's linoleum floor. There was not even a splinter in sight.

There were a few more pictures of the door, plus a couple of the kitchen. Then came the living room.

01:08:31 12/24/2005: Jerry Riggins. Officer Jackson had not been exaggerating, except Ari did not get the impression that Jerry had been staring at the Moon when he was shot. The green easy chair was facing the picture window, yes, but it seemed to Ari

that the victim had been caught in the side of the head while turning to face the killer. The camera flash was reflected in the window, as well as several silhouettes. There was the cameraman, a man in uniform whose face was indiscernible, and a large man wearing a sports jacket. That face, too, disappeared at the edge of the reflection, but Ari was sure it was Carrington.

The cameraman had shifted position as he took shots from numerous angles. He had worked his way to the front of the body, apparently leaning sideways to avoid stepping in the blood-soaked patch on the carpet. Ari finally saw the Christmas tree, though with the gruesome remains of Jerry Riggins' head in the foreground. The tree was strung with decorative lights, but they were not on. Perhaps someone had switched them off because their reflection in the window had interfered with the cameraman.

"Oh shit."

Ari turned to find his neighbor leaning over to gape at his monitor.

"What kind of sick shit are you looking at?"

Ari leaned the other way for a view of the young man's screen. A naked couple was making lust against a wall. The stud-star pulled out, forced the woman down on her knees, and came in her face.

"And what kind of shit is this?" 'Shit' sounded odd on Ari's lips. He could swear with almost miraculous felicity in Arabic, and could roll out his *stramaledetto's* as well as any Italian. But there was a crude sonority to the fuck/shit lexicon that he found hard to emulate. He had discovered long ago that oaths and humor were among the most difficult cultural interchanges to negotiate. But Ari's neighbor took no notice of the stiff pronunciation.

"Hey!" The young man yanked away. "This is freedom of speech, man."

"Are you exposing yourself?" Ari glanced down. "Are you ejaculating in your pants?"

The young man rolled away a couple of feet, twisting in his chair.

"Leave me to mine and I'll leave you to yours," Ari whispered. "Agreed?"

The young man jutted out his jaw and presented a crooked sneer. He looked like a wild boar. His eyes shifted.

Ari quickly went back to his screen and opened a new window. The young man performed a rapid alt-tab. When the reference librarian arrived, she saw Fox News on Ari's monitor and lectures on medieval philosophy on the young man's.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes," the two men said in unison. Ari was abashed that the woman had gone from being an object of flirtation to an arch foe in one easy flash.

"That's good. Let me know if I can be of any assistance."

"We will," the men answered, both startled by a bolt of awareness. They had unwittingly and unwillingly become allies.

The librarian made her flat-footed way back to her desk. Ari and the young man turned away from each other and alt-tabbed back to their respective studies.

Ari was once again surprised by an erection. Could he have possibly been effected by the young man's pornography? Or was it the lingering oatmeal warmth of the librarian? He could not continue like this.

His biological embarrassment deflated as he re-focused on Jerry Riggins' bloody, empty eye sockets. A voice seemed to call Ari from a vast, blind chorus. He angrily

dismissed the memory of Rana's face when he turned her over in the courtyard.

He skipped ahead to Moria Riggins.

"Sicko shit."

Ari whirled, but the young man was still planted firmly in front of his screen.

"*Neek Hallak*," Ari snarled.

Moria had been sitting on the edge of her bed when she was shot. Facing the bedroom window, although Ari doubted she had been watching the moon. Her eyes bulged slightly from the hydrostatic shock, but at least they were still in her skull. Her powder blue robe was cinched at the waist. Ari clicked ahead rapidly to a photograph of the slippers. They were plain, pale blue, matching the robe. There was a wavy pattern in the fabric along the edge of the soles. Most definitely a water stain, but was it recent? From the picture it was impossible to say if they were still wet. Ari noted several framed portraits on a nearby dresser. Using the sliding toolbar, he shifted the image up and zoomed. Mr. and Mrs. Massington and their two children. The boy looked to be around sixteen. Tina Press had told Ari that Moria's brother had been killed in a car wreck.

He studied Tom Massington, the Tin Man who had banished Moria from his will. His face bore the harsh contentment of a man who made difficult decisions at other peoples' expense. His son showed that same contentment, but without the harshness. He would have grown into it, as Tom Massington himself no doubt had, and become the spitting image of his father.

In comparison, Heather Massington seemed soft and unfocused. Ari saw none of the stern beauty concocted by his imagination and Tina's description of her as a cold fish. Nor did he detect any hint of the *femme fatale*. Yet there was hidden strength. She had

broken from her husband when it came to their daughter, choosing to leave Moria in her will. And to Ari's eye it was obvious she had strayed from the marriage bed. Looking at young Moria at fourteen or fifteen years of age, he smiled grimly. The resemblance to the illicit lover was striking. Tina had told him Heather shed no tears over her son. Yet Tracy Mackenzie said Moria's mother had been completely distraught when she made her one and only visit to the Riggins house after the murders. The love child still bore the largest part of Heather's affection.

01:27:20 12/24/2005: Joshua Riggins' bedroom. And here the deception, or self-deception, became most transparent. Joshua's body was lying sideways on the bed. He was barefoot, but a small robe lay under him. Ari could see cartoon characters woven into the robe's fabric. One arm was still inside the sleeve, while the other lay curled at the waist. Most striking, though, were the streaks on the front of his pajama shirt. Saliva, thick mucous, tiny pink rivulets that Ari could only see on zooming in. Had Joshua been sick? Yet it did not look like vomit, nor was there any sign of vomit on the ruffled bedsheets. And where was the ghosting pattern mentioned in the matrix worksheet? He zoomed in closer. Just as the image began to blur in over-focus, he thought he could see flecks of blood on the shirt front and at the knees. The pattern was at waist-level.

The following picture was a close-up of the head wound. Ari studied it for a moment, then clicked to the next file. He immediately noticed something odd on Joshua's nightstand. A gaudy Batman clock was half hidden behind what at first looked like a blue and white bundle of cloth. He zoomed in and saw a facecloth surrounded by small beads of water. There was an open prescription bottle next to the pack, but when he attempted a closer look the image blurred. It was as though the cameraman had

predicted his complaint, because the next shot was a close-up of the bottle. Zooming blurred this picture, as well, but at least now he could pick out the small letters at the bottom left of the label: Valium.

He clicked forward several files until he came to William Riggins. Unlike his brother's, William's bed was almost immaculate. The boy was on his back under a crisp sheet. Except for the bullet wound, it had all the formality of a body in a casket. Ari zoomed in on the nose, upper lip, and mouth. He bowed his head and offered up a silent prayer.

He had seen enough, but he continued to the end. The last file was another shot of the back door from inside. Having started at the beginning, Ari was puzzled by this return to the point of entry.

02:15:17 12/24/2005. The investigator had spent an hour and fifteen minutes plying his camera throughout the house. What caught Ari's interest was the broken wood from the door littering the entranceway. There was no sign of the path Ari had assumed the police had cleared through the mess after Jackson and Mangioni had entered the house.

He went back to the first picture of the door taken from the back yard. Standing open, but from that angle the floor was out of sight. He clicked on the next picture. There...the floor completely swept clean. The next four images showed the same assiduous housekeeping.

He switched to the directory. None of the files had a proper title, but was listed as 100_001.JPG, 100_002.JPG and so forth. The first six files showed a (2) next to their numerical name. None of the remaining files showed this parenthetical footnote.

He sat back and noticed that his pulchritudinous neighbor had departed. A moment later, the reference librarian slipped into the vacated chair. She made a sound of disparagement and reached for the keyboard. Then she noticed Ari watching her.

"Oh, this." She flicked a reproachful glance at the monitor. "I wondered why he left so soon. He managed to lock up the computer, again. Sometimes the filters just get overwhelmed--oh, no! You don't want--"

But Ari had already leaned over for a look. A woman's mouth was frozen in mid-blow job.

"Ah," said Ari. "Freedom of speech."

"Is that what he told you? That's what he always says. 'Freedom of speech' my Twinkies."

"I'm not familiar with that phrase."

A smile penetrated the librarian's frown. "That's all right. It's an anachronism." She hit CTRL/ALT/DEL and rebooted the system. Then she blushed and literally stifled a laugh by clamping her hand over her mouth. "Freedom of speech!" she said after the spasm passed. She plinked the screen. Ari smiled.

"May I inquire as to your name?" he said.

"If you tell me yours."

Ari gave her a long look. She was certainly no great beauty. There were a few mild acne scars on her cheeks, her hair was lifeless, and her hands were a shade too red, as though she had been scrubbing pots. Yet he found himself entertained by the sparkle behind her rather thick glasses. And when she was not feeling harassed, her voice had that warm, smooth tone that Ari prized. It was said that Cleopatra was no sizzling

sexpot--but her voice had seduced an empire.

"I would like to tell you my name. If I showed you my driver's license, you would see Ari Ciminon, complete with identification number. But that is not my name."

It was her turn to stretch out a stare. Her blush reached new heights. "Mr. Ciminon...I'm not used to this."

"Used to what?"

"To...talking like this."

"You've never told anyone your name before?"

She smiled and took a deep breath. "Lynn Gillespie."

"Thank you, Ms. Gillespie."

"You're very welcome, Mr. Aladdin. If you're going to use a pseudonym, I might as well pick the one I like."

"Fair enough. I need some assistance with..." He gestured at the monitor.

"Someone's waiting for this workstation." Lynn glanced towards the reference desk, then shrugged. "They can wait one minute more. What do you need?" She rolled her chair closer. Ari felt the oatmeal warmth.

"This directory..."

"These are picture files?"

"Yes. I'd rather not show them to you."

"All right..."

"I was wondering about this..." He laid a finger over the (2) on the directory.

"Do you know what this means?"

"It's a copy." She scrolled down the directory. "The first six files...all copies."

"Where are the originals?"

She went to the bottom of the directory. "It looks like they've been deleted, at least from this disk."

"Why would someone delete the originals but leave copies?"

"You didn't create these files?" Lynn asked.

"They were made for me."

"Okay. Well, what might have happened is that someone tried to delete all those files at once. When they blocked off the files they wanted to get rid of, they accidentally copied them at the same time. It's happened to me before."

"So you don't think they meant for these files to be here?"

"I have no idea. You're being very mysterious. Are you sure I can't just..." She floated the cursor over one of the files.

"No, please..." He cupped his hand over hers and gently removed it from the mouse. He did not let go right away. A tremendous, erotic sadness filled him. His need left a palpable taste in his mouth. Imagine, wanting to plunge into this sad little Plain Jane. He let go.

"Is..." Lynn caught her voice. "Um...is that all?"

"No. I need to send an email."

"That's no problem. You have an account? That's no problem, either. I can set one up for you in Gmail. It just takes a second."

He closed the window and removed the ScanDisk, then rolled out of her way.

"Which of your many names do you want on the account?" she asked as she pulled up Google.

"You choose."

She thought a moment, then gave him a very attractive smirk. She typed in 'Ali Baba.'

"Please...not that."

"Why--"

"That's what the American soldiers call the enemy in Iraq."

"Oh."

"I am not the enemy."

"And I don't know Aladdin's first name," said Lynn sadly.

"Nor I."

She draped her hands over her knees for a moment. "How do you spell Ciminon?"

Within minutes the account was set up--and Lynn had learned his street address, because that was one of the fields required to set up an account. She did not appear to make the connection between Beach Court Lane and the Riggins family.

"One more thing," Ari said as she began to rise from her seat.

"Really, there's someone waiting--"

"The email I need to write is in Arabic." Ari spread his hands over the keyboard.

"And as you can see..."

"Use Google's language tool," she said, a little briskly. Obviously her job took precedence over aimless flirtation. But when he put on his best face of unadulterated stupidity, she lowered herself back down. "Here." She opened another window and pulled up the Google translator. "Just type what you want in this box in English, then

pick English to Arabic. Do you know how to copy and paste?"

Ari nodded contritely.

"Copy the translation into your email and send it. Now, you have less than ten minutes left on your reservation. And I really have to go..."

Ari lingered in the oatmeal for a moment, then set about composing his message. He needed help beyond a few basic lessons on the computer. And he knew just the man for the job.

SEVENTEEN

Saddam Hussein had lost his heads.

It had been years since Ghaith had visited the Karradat Mariam, where the Republican Palace was located. One of the Great Man's interpreters had come down with a fatal disease, and the President's German was on the far side of nonexistent.

The President had looked at him suspiciously when he was introduced. But then Ghaith (fully aware and fully reminded that he was a nonentity) had screwed up enough courage to recall for the President a glorious day on Pig Island, when 'Mr. Deputy' had presented Ghaith's father with a case of Jack Daniels. Ghaith's appreciation of that moment in his childhood impressed the President with its warmth, and almost drew a tear from the Great Man. Yes, Ghaith was just the man he needed at that moment. In any other country, with his multilingual talents, Ghaith would have been ideally suited for the Akashat/Al Qaim project, which involved contractors from all around the world: Swiss, German, Danish, French, British, Austrian, Swedish...and American. But the Great Man did not want anyone to know too much about his nerve gas plants, and Ghaith was soon returned to his usual duties.

On that visit, while approaching the palace, the giant bronze heads of Saddam Hussein as a warrior in militant Saladin headgear had frowned down upon him from the roof. Even then, he thought they were majestically tasteless. Soon after the invasion, the Americans had carted the heads off to the scrapheap. Ghaith felt a sense of loss.

Security had tightened since the double suicide bombing that had wrecked the marketplace and the Green Zone Café. The guards at FOB Prosperity looked askance at

the driver, a corporal from III Corps, then asked Ghaith to step out of the Humvee for a little waltz with a metal detector before allowing them to proceed out of the peripheral Red Zone.

They were stopped again by members of the Florida National Guard. As the soldiers frisked Ghaith, his eyes fell upon a trailer park on the road leading into the compound. A sign announced that this park was known as 'The Palms'. It was packed with Shia refugees from Sadr City. The Americans thought it would be bad publicity to evict them. A good face was worth a hundred lives. The embassy was breeding insurgents right under its nose. All the T-Walls and blast walls and barbed wire didn't mean much when the enemy shared your toilets.

Inside, the palace seemed to be falling apart, with plaster flaking off the walls and rubble from the columns strewn underfoot. Whether this was because Iraqis had built it or because the Coalition had occupied it was an open question. Ghaith recalled the huge dining hall of the South Wing, quotes from the Koran scowling down from the walls with grim imprimaturs as one tried to enjoy a meal. Then there were the giant murals of the South Ballroom: a Jew-less Jerusalem, the World Trade Towers coming down, Scuds rocketing off to kill God-knew-whom.

Ghaith was led down the Center Wing, current home of the United States Embassy. The corporal handed him off to a sergeant (who shrugged), the sergeant to a civilian (who shook his head), the civilian to a colonel (who nodded). The colonel guided him to a straight-backed chair in a small office which must have been a broom closet under the previous regime. The colonel took up his seat behind a small desk and began perusing a folder.

"Abu Karim Ghaith Ibrahim?"

"Close enough."

"'Abu Karim' ...isn't that sort of like a tribal name? Weren't those banned by the Baath party?"

"Only in the military."

"But aren't you military?"

"I'm the father of Karim. That's enough."

"Okay," said the colonel, surrendering to confusion. "Says here you were a registry clerk at the Baghdad Central Confinement Facility, previously known as Abu Ghraib Prison."

"I worked there occasionally."

"In a briefing with his commanding officer, Captain Rodriguez said you made some comments about the Wolf Brigade to the effect--"

"I know what I said."

The colonel looked up sharply, unaccustomed to having his comments decapitated. Ghaith was not impressed by his razor-sharp ACU, perfect bearing, or authoritarian demeanor. There was something about the colonel that labeled him as a permanent desk jockey. Perhaps he was the type the infantrymen in the field disparaged as 'Powerpoint Commandos.'

"You do know why you're here, don't you?"

"I've been told that I might be useful," Ghaith answered blandly.

"That's right. And if you're very useful to us, we can be very useful to you. However, neither of us can be very useful to the other if you get your head shot off."

Ghaith's eyes wandered to the window behind the colonel. He could see the top of the orange grove behind the palace. He knew that if he looked down from this third-story office he would see a large kidney-shaped pool.

"Your story has gone all the way up the chain of command," said the colonel, leaning back and clasping his hands behind his head. "We would very much like to employ you in a big way, but..."

"If you perform a thorough background check on me, if you start asking my neighbors and former coworkers about me, what remains of my family will probably be assassinated."

"Then you see the problem," said the colonel. He had invoked some kind of mental chant to relax himself and his voice took on an almost jovial tone. "We know very little about you, and I strongly suspect you will offer very little voluntarily. Were you a Baathist? Are you one now?"

"I am not and have never been a member of the Communist Party."

The colonel laughed. "You've brushed up on your U.S. 101." He lowered his arms to the file. He closed the manila folder and held it up. "See that? That's an awfully thin file. I've seen bigger CV's for administrative assistants."

"I don't believe there is a man in Iraq who would tell you the full story of his life," said Ghaith. "Of course, I've heard of your wonderful American transparency. I'm very happy there is one place on Earth where a man can reveal everything about himself without fear of consequences."

"Sarcasm won't get you anywhere." The colonel tossed the folder down and again sought reassurance in some ghostly temple in his mind. Whatever his method of self-

control, it did wonders for his attitude. He smiled and reached into a desk drawer. He pulled out a deck of cards. "Recognize this?"

"Playing cards with pictures of the Iraqis most wanted by the Coalition. Baathists and members of the Revolutionary Command Council."

"Officially, these are called 'personality identification playing cards'. Fifty-five of them, including a few Jokers. I can't begin to remember all of them. Quite frankly, I have difficulty with all these Arab and Persian and what-all names, anyway. But I can't remember all of our Presidents, either, and there's only forty-three of those." He shuffled the deck. "Are you familiar with flash cards?"

"Our teachers used them when I was a child," said Ghraith.

"Good." He drew out a card and held it up, his thumb covering the name at the bottom. "What can you tell me about this guy?"

"A nobody. Barzan Ibrahim Hasan al-Tikriti. Presidential Advisor. He was captured by the Americans. Being tried for crimes against humanity. He's the former president's half-brother, so he'll probably get his throat scissored."

"And this?"

"A nobody. Tariq Aziz. Deputy Prime Minister."

The colonel flipped the card over. "Oh yeah, this was the guy on TV all the time during the run-up." He took out another card.

"A nobody. Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri. Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council."

Another card.

"A real nobody. My last boss. Mahmoud Diab al-Ahmed, Minister of the

Interior. Last I saw of him was in 2003, when he was standing next to that other fool, Mohammed Sa'eed al-Sahhaf, the Information Minister. He was shouting like an idiot. He was going to bring down the U.S. Army with a knife and a Kalashnikov. He's in jail now."

"You said he was your boss?"

"The police were under the Ministry of the Interior. Still are."

"You were a policeman?"

"Just an ordinary cop."

"I doubt that, but since that's the most you've said about yourself so far, I'll let it rest for the moment."

The colonel tried out a couple dozen more cards on Ghaith before growing bored. He rested the stack on the desk. "That's pretty impressive, Mr. Ibrahim. To tell you the truth, I'm half-convinced that you were a ranking Baathist or RCC official." The colonel tapped the deck with a letter opener shaped like a sword. "For all I know, you're another Joker. The 56th man. But so long as you're not in the cards, that's clearance enough. That is, if you're useful enough. And that must be true, because the MNF-I Commander himself says it's so. There's just one more formality we need to go through before we proceed."

The colonel appeared to have nothing else to say. They were waiting for someone with more authority. Ghaith suspected it would be a high-ranking member of the embassy staff. He took out his cigarettes.

"Can't do that here," the colonel shrugged.

Ghaith stared at him, but did not feel like arguing and put the pack away. He

stood and walked over to the window. There it was, Saddam's famous swimming pool, gloriously blue and a sure magnet for overheated members of the Coalition and the embassy.

"The imams would have a field day with this," Ghaith said with slangy expertise. The colonel came up next to him and immediately understood.

"Men and women swimming together." He gave a small cough. "Maybe we can't smoke indoors, but there are other consolations."

Ghaith looked beyond the pool to a group of groundskeepers near the orange grove. "You have many Iraqi civilians here."

"Mostly Shia. Does that bother you?"

"Not in the least." Ghaith noticed that one of the workers was watching the palace as he pretended to trim a hedge. Even at this distance he looked familiar.

"Colonel, I think there will be a major rocket attack on the palace within the next fifteen minutes."

The colonel snorted. "I don't think anyone can be that useful." Then he hesitated. "How would you know--"

"I saw at least five former inmates of Abu Ghraib on my way in here."

"In the Green Zone?"

"And they saw me."

"You think they would launch an attack because of you?" The colonel's inner mantra faltered. "Just who the hell are you, really?"

"The man everyone wants dead, it appears," Ghaith said calmly.

There was a knock and the office door opened. A lightly-complected, middle-aged

man with sleepy eyes walked in. Ghaith cocked his brow in surprise. The colonel, too, was taken aback.

"Mr. Ambassador, I didn't know you were coming."

"General Casey is giving this high priority. I thought I would come in person."

He looked at Ghaith. "This is the man?"

Ghaith had been too preoccupied keeping his head attached to his shoulders to pay much attention to current events. He had heard mention of the new ambassador, but he fully expected him to be on his way as quickly as his predecessor. Iraq was as much a swampy armpit for career diplomats as it was for everybody else. There was no need to keep track of these token whisps from the other side of the world.

Only the latest ambassador was more neighbor than foreigner. He was a farce, a joke, a pusillanimous trick. In short, an Afghan. He might have obliged the Americans with the requisite forms and pledges and kowtows, but in Ghaith's eyes he was a peasant to the core.

"Tse ghalti shewey da!" he complained in Pashto.

"No mistake," said the ambassador with a gentle nod. "Be assured, I am not a Pashtun. Ze la Amerika." He extended his hand.

A firm, cold handshake to show what a good American he is.

Ghaith saw no option but to take the proffered hand, which he did in the most cursory manner possible.

The colonel was displeased that Ghaith's opinion of the ambassador was so obviously negative.

"Mr. Ambassador, if you would take a seat..." The colonel gestured gracefully at

a divan against the wall. Then he pointed at the straight-backed chair and told Ghaith, "Sit."

Ghaith had been raised in a culture where insults were avenged with knives and guns. But he had also trained himself to swallow insults from superiors who handed them out in malevolent abundance. At the moment, the colonel was his superior. He sat.

"I believe Mr. Ibrahim has been advised on the details of the proposal," said the colonel as he lowered himself behind his desk.

"So have I," said the ambassador. "It presents grave problems."

"Then it can't be done?" the colonel asked, pleased by the prospect.

"You're asking that an Iraqi citizen be sent to the United States, where he will be established in a safe haven. From this haven, he will be providing information on possible threats to security in his homeland."

"I understand the complications," the colonel nodded. "You would need to get the cooperation of the Department of Justice. This isn't exactly their bailiwick. Uh...their cup of tea? Anyway, it's not as if Mr. Ibrahim is a Mafia don or drug lord. Witness Protection was set up solely for the domestic environment, I believe. But if it's a matter of payment, we can shake out funding from those frozen oil workers' union accounts."

Saddam Hussein had outlawed unions. The American pro-consul had outlawed unions. Now that he was gone, the workers had celebrated their new freedom by unionizing. The Iraqi government had promptly banned them and frozen their assets.

"It's not funding or our bureaucracy that worries me, colonel," said the ambassador. "Iraq is now a sovereign nation. We would need their approval for this, and any information we received from this gentleman would have to be shared--" The

ambassador stopped when he saw Ghaith looking at his watch. "Are we keeping you from a pressing engagement?"

"Mr. Ibrahim predicted a rocket attack within fifteen minutes," the colonel grinned, and pointed at the clock on the wall. "That was at eleven-hundred hours. It's now eleven-thirteen and counting."

The ambassador's sad eyes showed no humor. "If there is a rocket attack in a few minutes, I certainly hope you had no part in arranging it."

"And get myself blown up?" Ghaith said.

"We encounter martyrs for the cause every day."

"But in this case, to what point?"

The ambassador dwelled on this a moment, then nodded. "I see your logic."

"Mr. Ibrahim has also requested asylum for his wife and son. I understand his wife is an invalid. This might prove an unwarranted drain on the resources of the state."

Ghaith went still. He watched the colonel narrowly.

"Of course, we understand that his family will be put at increased risk if his activities are exposed. It so happens that the government of Iceland has kindly offered to take in--"

Ghaith stood.

"No, please, Mr. Ibrahim," said the colonel, raising his hands. "Think about it. If you were found out, and the Fedayeen contacted one of their friends in the States, do you really want your family with you if they come knocking?"

Ghaith thought about this, and sat back down.

"Now, I still have some further--" The colonel stopped when the ambassador

nodded. "You have a question for the applicant, sir?"

Ghaith had not heard himself referred to as an 'applicant' before. It made him sound like one of those thousands of Iraqis who had hovered around the Red Zone in the early days, waiting for the Americans to employ them. Only in that case, you were considered lucky to get as much as an application, let alone an interview with someone with the authority to hire you. Casting aside ethnic, tribal and religious origins, the insurgency was as simple as massive unemployment combined with equally massive access to weapons.

But Ghaith had not formally applied for asylum. He had glumly listened to officers balance the tremendous bonus he represented alongside a past that remained largely unknown. Was he more risk than asset? Ghaith's presence in the Republican Palace was evidence of their conclusion. But the military could not provide the final word.

"I've been told that you have the remarkable ability to stroll down the streets of Sadr City and identify enemies of the state," said the ambassador.

"Many of the insurgents--are we allowed to use that word, yet? 'Insurgents'?"

"We will, eventually," the ambassador sighed. "Please continue."

"Many of them were prisoners under the old regime. Not political prisoners. Riffraff who would do anything for money."

"Including blowing themselves up?"

"Most certainly. Their families benefit. And being good Muslims, they don't actually believe that they're dying...in the usual manner."

"Over 100,000 prisoners were released before the war, with this very situation in

mind. How many of those inmates do you remember?"

"Very few."

The colonel leaned forward. "What's that?"

"It's only when I see them that I remember."

"Human mnemonics," the ambassador smiled.

"Did you see one of those former prisoners outside the window a few minutes ago?"

"Hazem Rasheed of the Dulaym tribe. Imprisoned for various petty crimes. He's a country boy from al-Anbar, near the Syrian border. He was one of Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi's jihadi foot soldiers before you blew him up last week."

"Whoa!" the colonel almost shouted, with a trace of glee. "That's all post-liberation."

"I've kept tabs on some of our former guests of the state."

The euphemism did not go down well with either interviewer. Ghaith could see no way to tactfully withdraw it.

"That's beside the point, Colonel. This man is saying you have a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq just outside your window. That's a rather extreme claim. Perhaps you should look into it when we're finished here."

"I'll do that."

The ambassador leaned forward on the divan. "Were you ever involved in the torture of prisoners?"

"No," Ghaith answered.

"But you knew prisoners were being tortured?"

"We all did. By 'all', I include the man on the street. Amnesty International knew, which means the whole world knew."

"Eleven twenty-seven hours," the colonel observed. "Your rocket attack is running behind schedule."

"Colonel..." The ambassador was already famous for negotiating compromises, and with that single word managed to quell the ire of the American soldier and Iraqi civilian, both of whom eased back in their chairs, a little. The ambassador turned to Ghaith. "You've been working for us for a year, now."

"A year and a half," Ghaith amended.

"And you're still alive. I've written to the Secretary to advise her that I fear for my own Iraqi staff members, that they can't go home at night without the risk of being murdered or kidnapped. And yet you managed to survive..."

"Playing both sides," said the colonel.

"Wouldn't you do whatever it takes to keep yourself and your family alive, Colonel?" said the ambassador without taking his eyes from Ghaith. "I've also been advised that casualties have been reduced dramatically in any unit where you have been posted. You're credited with saving quite a few of our soldiers' lives."

Ghaith nodded in acknowledgement.

"However, your recent behavior has been counter-productive to your own safety."

"A ski mask is insufferably hot in 120 weather."

"I can imagine. But what about your family?"

"They are staying at Ibn Sina Hospital."

"Yes, your wife. That was a dreadful accident."

"Accident?" said Ghaith bitterly.

"That hospital's in the Green Zone!" the colonel exclaimed. How did you manage that?"

"He's our employee," said the ambassador. "And your son? He is well?"

How rude of you to ask.

It was a good thing Ghaith was not superstitious. Many Iraqis would have been offended by the ambassador's inquisitiveness. To ask of the health of a man's son or daughter was to invite the Evil Eye. But perhaps, under the circumstances, the question was unavoidable.

"He is well. He is watching over his mother." Ghaith offered up his most ingratiating smile. "Mr. Ambassador, if this proposal isn't feasible for myself, I would invoke the privilege of Melmastia for my wife and son."

The ambassador's face reveled in a mix of emotions before going blank. Observing the colonel's perplexity, he enlightened him on the Afghan code of honor. "Melmastia is one of the concepts of Pashtunwali. A Pashtun is obligated to show the utmost hospitality to anyone under his roof. The guest could be his worst enemy. It doesn't matter. The code is supreme."

"Isn't that a little theoretical?" the colonel inquired politely.

"The Pashtuns are famous for their hospitality."

"All those guys who are killing each other up in the mountains?"

"I'm sure 'those guys' weren't guests." The ambassador studied Ghaith with his sleepy eyes. "The hospitality extends only to those directly under one's roof."

"Isn't the United States your 'roof'?" Ghaith asked.

"In any event, we are still confronted with how to present this to the Iraqi government. For us to be harboring informants would be intolerable--"

The siren went off.

"The Q36!" the colonel jumped. He looked at the ambassador. "Mr. Ambassador, if you would please get under my desk."

"The insurgents are not only tardy, they are notoriously poor shots." The ambassador didn't move.

The colonel did not press the matter, nor did he extend the invitation to take cover to Ghaith. He remained seated, wincing, annoyed by the noise if not the danger it was alerting them to.

There was a bright flash, followed immediately by an explosion somewhere on the grounds.

"One-twenty-two millimeter," the colonel observed. "Sounds like it hit one of the tent cities." He clucked. "Killing their own people."

"Didn't your people kill your people during your civil war?" Ghaith asked.

"One-oh-one again," said the colonel. He did not elaborate, because the alarm was still wailing. "Christ, another radar hit."

The next blast shook the room.

"That was closer," the colonel observed.

The ambassador did not comment on this. He watched Ghaith for a bit, then drifted off into thought.

The alarm stuttered, then went off again.

"Three Q36 hits," the colonel shook his head. "Those Fedayeen can't last much"

longer. The Apaches will be zeroing in on them."

The colonel and the ambassador lurched forward when the next explosion created a shower of falling plaster. Ghaith did not budge. He took out a cigarette and lit up.

The colonel shot him a warning look.

"I thought even in your country the condemned man is allowed a final smoke."

"Smoking's banned in most prisons," said the colonel.

"Ah...masters of torture."

The siren kicked in again.

"Colonel," said the ambassador. "Is it possible someone is directing this attack from inside the compound? Perhaps by this Bedouin that he was speaking of?"

"You can't walk rockets in like artillery--"

Wham!

There were shouts in the hallway outside the office.

"Jesus, did they hit the South Wing?"

"Colonel."

"Yes, Mr. Ambassador?"

"As soon as the all clear sounds, may I suggest you immediately put this man onto a rhino bus and get him out to the airport?"

"I'll need clearance--"

"General Casey has already cleared this, pending my approval." He turned to Ghaith, exposing his broad teeth. It could have been a smile. It could have been a grimace. "And I approve."

The dark Lexus was parked next to the driveway entrance when Ari arrived home after his visit to the library. Carrington got out and followed while he drove the xB up to the garage. Ari knew there would be trouble when the detective glanced towards Howie's house, then the river, as though to verify no one was watching. Ari decided there was nothing he could do about the trouble he saw brewing beyond turning his back on Carrington and opening the garage door. He drove inside, parked, and got out. He smiled and nodded when he saw Carrington aiming a P226 at him.

SIG Sauer, holds 12 to 15 rounds, depending on the size of the ammunition. A pistol designed for the U.S. Army. A favorite with Navy SEALs.

"*Ma sha' Allah*, Detective Sergeant Carrington."

"That doesn't sound Italian. Flat on your stomach, hands behind your back."

"But this is a new jacket."

"Flat on your stomach, put your hands behind your back."

"Look at that oil on the concrete. I really can't. Why don't I lean against the car while holding my hands over my head, then place my hands firmly on this little car's roof, and then spread my legs in the approved manner?"

Ari knew this was perilous behavior. Carrington had the gray, cold look of someone who wanted to share the death of his soul. But he had dealt with men far more dangerous. Men who had had no soul to begin with. He was familiar with the lines that could be crossed.

Carrington nodded. "Do it, then."

Ari complied. The detective came up behind him and closed one end of a pair of handcuffs around his left wrist.

"Reach behind with your hand," Carrington grunted. "No, your right hand, goddammit!"

Once the cuffs were on, he pulled Ari back from the car and waved him towards the inner door. He marched to the base of the steps.

"Stop."

Ari stopped. Carrington stepped around him and opened the door, then drew aside, the gun still aimed at his prisoner.

"Okay."

Ari stepped up into the narrow hallway leading to the kitchen. A glance at the back porch door revealed a curled piece of tape. He'd had a visitor. Carrington? Howie Nottoway? He had been wondering if Jackson or Mangioni had let drop the inconsequential detail that Ari had cooked up a lot of smoke while preparing his *masgouf*. Carrington might have made the connection between the air vent's poor performance and the prize blocking the tube.

He intended to look at the stove when he entered the kitchen, but his attention was drawn instead to an envelope on the table. The return address was Ted's Custom Lawn Care & Landscape Design Service. His name was handwritten across the front, along with a crude smiley-face flourish.

Two visitors?

What time had they arrived? Had they met? That would have been interesting to see. Effervescent Fred and a terrified Howie. Or had Fred, or even Ted himself, come through the back door?

"Sit," Carrington ordered.

Ari sat facing the rear of the kitchen. The tape he had stretched between the Jenn-Air's bottom access panel and the oven door was broken. Two visitors, then--unless the U.S. Marshals Service was investigating Richmond's drug trade, which Ari doubted. He was beginning to think of his house as a sieve that allowed in any passerby, including gun-toting detectives.

Carrington looked at the chair across from Ari and recalled how uncomfortable he had found it on his previous visit. He leaned against the counter.

"Ever hear the phrase, 'you in a heap of trouble'?"

"No, but I can guess its import," said Ari with unnecessary and risky snobbery.

"You assaulted three civilians. That may be an everyday thing in Godfather-land, but it's a crime here."

"I wasn't aware of that. Obviously, you must arrest me."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Carrington's eyes seemed to borrow weight from his heavy brow. They sank into a deadly scowl. "We're going to cut the crap here, right? You think I'm a cop on the take. That you beat up on some lowlifes who had done you no harm and that you can get away with it by blackmailing me. Am I right?"

"I was only trying to find out--"

"Yeah, well you found out the wrong thing. Make that double. First, you interfered with an ongoing investigation of illicit drug trafficking, then you interfered with an ongoing murder investigation. How about them apples?"

Apples? Ari didn't inquire. The ghost of his beloved foreign language instructor had a few educational gaps to answer for. Ari's slang was obviously not up to par. He made himself as comfortable as he could with his hands bound behind him and worked

on the problem of what to do if Carrington opened the envelope.

There had always been a thespian element in the detective's behavior. It could be sarcastic. It could be menacing. But it had provided a kind of levity that was totally absent now. Carrington looked as heavy in mood as he was in body. Gravity had dragged him down to basic elements. Ari could tell it was not a pleasant situation for him. At heart, Carrington was not a cop who enjoyed a good wallow in human muck. Mother and the Kayak Express were bad habits left over from his lost youth. Ari, too, had known the consummate pleasures of family life. He had lost those pleasures early. Carrington had come upon them late. Both of them could become deadly if that lifestyle was threatened.

"Mind if I smoke?" said Ari.

"Be my guest," Carrington answered without humor.

Ari flexed the cuffs behind his back and gave up on the idea.

"Detective Sergeant Carrington, you look very tired."

"And the fun's just begun. Where is it?"

Ari thought a look of innocence would be futile, but tried it on, anyway.

"I mean everything. What you took from those boys, from Black Mamma. And what you found here. Just hand it over and we'll be squared. I mean it. I won't lay a finger on you or your...whatever the hell it is you do."

"I don't have access to those items now. However, I do have \$127 and some change on me. I'd be glad to give it to you, if that's the required fee in this country."

"Fee?"

"The fee for doing business, for not being harassed by the authorities, for just

getting on."

"You think I'm a grafter? This is the best goddamn country in the world. We don't have that kind of thing."

"What would you do if I laughed?"

"Knock the shit out of you."

"Then I won't laugh."

"You don't have the shit here? Or the money? I could search the house again. But like you said, I'm tired. I might just save myself the trouble and shoot you."

"I've hidden it away. Quite far away. It would take over an hour to get there. And by then it would be dark and I probably wouldn't be able to find it. Even if I did, you would still probably shoot me, because that's not the real reason you're here."

"Why am I here?"

"To preserve your daughter's good name."

"So..." said Carrington. And nothing else.

"I'm sure you've tried to run a background check on me. I'm aware that you've run into unexpected obstacles. I saw your lips move when you looked at my credit card in the restaurant the other night. You were memorizing the account number. What were you able to learn from that?"

"Bank of Nova Scotia my fucking ass." Carrington was stirred up. He had been thwarted professionally, a far sharper pang than having his peccadilloes exposed. "Yeah, I tried to run it. Got all sorts of bogus crap back about international law and Canada wouldn't release that kind of data to a shit-ass American cop. It's a fucking Visa, for Christ's sake. They don't *have* a country. Which reminds me...where do you keep your

wallet?"

"Inside jacket pocket."

Carrington came over and took it out. He eased painfully into the chair across from Ari and opened it up on the table. "I'll be damned. One-hundred and twenty-seven dollars. Not many people know the exact amount in their wallets." He gouged through the wallet's inserts with his thick fingers, pulling out plastic square by square. He held up Ari's driver's license. "Now this is interesting."

"Is it not in the approved format?"

"It's a Virginia license. It's got your address on it. I mean the address here, on Beach Court Lane."

"Yes?"

"You've been here hardly a week. You realize that you have thirty days before you have to title. Your car has a two-year state sticker and a Richmond sticker. And insurance, too! Getting all that would take a day. Have you been to the DMV? Have you been to City Hall?"

"Obviously."

"Then tell me, which Division of Motor Vehicles office did you go to?"

"The main one."

"And where is that?"

Ari had no idea.

"Asshole." The detective took out another card. "Hey, Henrico County Library, issued today. Didn't take you for a bookworm, Mr. Ciminon."

Lynn the Librarian had suggested Ari get a permanent card at the circulation desk

if he planned on using the library frequently.

"I try to improve myself," he said.

"Check out any books? Any movies? No? Interesting." Carrington slipped out a small white envelope that bore the seal of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. He removed the card. "You got a helluva magnetic strip on here. I can see myself." He turned the card over. "Permanent Resident Card?"

"My Green Card."

"I saw the movie, with Gerard What's-His-French-Ass." Carrington studied Ari's picture, the biometric thumbprint and the arcane rows of numbers at the bottom of the card. Then he glanced over the personal information. "Born July 1, 1966. What sign is that?"

"Sign?"

"You know. In the horoscope. No idea? Hell if I know, either. My wife keeps track of that kind of thing. Every family needs a crackpot." The detective returned to the card. "Sex male. Country of origin, Italy. Resident since August 6, 2006. Where did you spend your time the last month and a half?"

"In Sicily, waiting for my card."

"How long you have to wait?"

"Almost three years."

"You sat around on that hot desert island for three years waiting for this?"

"Your Hispanic workers wait at long as thirteen years." Ari ventured a smile.

"Theoretically."

"You've got an Italian passport?"

"A European passport. Upstairs."

Carrington thought for a moment. "I guess it won't say anything different from this," he said, tapping the Green Card.

"No."

"Forget it, then. Anything else in here? Where's your Social Security Card? You can't work legally in this country without one."

"It's in the mail."

"No pictures? You haven't got any family or friends you care to look at?"

"I'm not a sentimental man."

"No kidding." Carrington laid the driver's license and Green Card side by side. "This stinks. I mean, you've arrived all processed and prepackaged. I've got one thing solid, and it doesn't make any sense."

"And what is that?"

"Iceland."

It was Ari's turn to be shocked into stillness. He immediately comprehended his mistake. The phone call....

"Fortunately, our department has a better relationship with the phone companies than fucking Nova Scotia and their Canadian comrades. It seems that someone used your credit card to make a call to Iceland from LaGuardia Airport a couple of weeks ago. It only lasted a few minutes, but it was pricey as hell. You should know better than to use a credit card to make a phone call. They'll gouge you blind."

Ari glanced down at the envelope. Carrington noticed, but stayed on topic.

"I called the number, of course. The department gets better rates, not that it

matters, with the taxpayers ponying up and all. I got a nurses' station at Foosvug...Foss...Fossvogur City Hospital in Rayjack...Ray...aw shit. Reykjavik! That's it! I asked if there was someone named Ciminon there. Nada. I asked if there were any Italians there. Nyet. I asked them if there was someone from the Middle East there. They asked me who I was. I said I was a cop and they hung up. Fucking foreigners."

Ari made no comment.

"So what am I supposed to make of this? You don't look Icelandic. You don't even look Italian. If you were some sort of foreign spy, you would've picked a house in Washington or New York, near one of the hot spots. Hell, you'd be living out of a suitcase. Unless you're one of those moles they talk about. But there again, you couldn't pick a less important place than Richmond, unless it's Fleatown, Arizona or something."

"So you've come to no conclusions?" Ari asked.

"I intend to find out more. Right now, what I think, you've got a relative hiding out in Rejectvick...Rackjack...fucking Ratville. So I've got your wife or somebody by the neck."

"And I've got your daughter."

"Yeah..."

"I will be happy to explain all of this to you if you will allow me a few minutes to digress."

"Those missionaries who taught you English must've had cucumbers stuck up their ass."

"It was your friend and my neighbor who first told me about the murders. In fact,

I learned about it on my first day."

"Howie Nottoway is no friend of mine."

"Your acquaintance, then. Don't you know each other through the Neighborhood Watch Association? I believe you have provided liaison services for them on occasion."

"Fucking internet," Carrington grouched.

"My interest was piqued. As you may have surmised, I was once an officer of the law, myself."

"Would you stop talking like that? I know you can talk normal. So you were a cop..."

"In a small way. A desk cop, I believe is the phrase. I was in charge of the registration department of a large prison."

"From what I've heard, all Sicily should be a jail," said Carrington. "So you were a clerk."

"I happen to have a lot of time on my hands. When I found out about the Riggins family, I thought it was my opportunity to take on a real case."

"Amateur hour."

"Perhaps. But I think I've done very well within my limitations. I know who the killer is. And his accomplices."

"Go on."

"Several years ago, Jerry Riggins entered a severe state of depression that did not lift until his death. You can see it in his paintings. Those 'smudges', as you call them. They got darker and darker as the years wore on. I don't think there was any profound artistic symbolism at work here. Jerry didn't have that kind of talent. It's an open

question as to if he had any talent at all."

"None whatsoever," Carrington grunted.

"He *did* win some regional award for outstanding new artist of the year before his marriage. Perhaps that was his downfall. The award inspired delusions of grandeur. When sales of his artwork did not match those delusions, he did not console himself the way most failed artists do, by claiming he was ahead of his time, that he was misunderstood, that the mass of humanity is philistine in the extreme...which I would agree with, by the way," Ari added, giving the detective an arch look.

"Yeah right, I can't tell Rembrandt's ass from Picasso's elbow. Get on with it."

"Using his new father-in-law's money, he began hiring galleries to display his work. There were gushing reviews on the internet, which I'm fairly certain Jerry wrote himself. I understand Hemingway wrote anonymously to Edmund Wilson--"

"Cut it out."

"Jerry began receiving civic awards for outstanding contributions to the city's welfare. Again, his father-in-law's money was at work, but there was another force, also. You."

"I don't follow."

"You are very much involved in community affairs. You were Sergeant Santa for three years running until, I suppose, other duties took you away from that. You helped sponsor Howie Nottoway when he set up the Riverside Neighborhood Watch. You were well-established to assist Jerry, and Moria, as up-and-comers in local affairs--thereby increasing publicity for that novel young artist, Jerry Riggins."

"The little fuck piggy-backed."

"As you say. During those early years, the Riggins couple produced two wonderful boys. Jerry was secure in his delusions, while Moria seemed content with married life."

"Only 'seemed'?"

"I've heard things that lead me to think she wasn't a sterling wife."

"You mean you've been listening to that slut, Tina."

"But then Jerry found out something that put a crimp in his enthusiasm. He must have wondered why you were always in the vicinity of his family. There are two pictures of you and Jerry and Moria in the newspaper archives. In the older one, Jerry and Moria are all smiles. In the last one, it almost seems that Jerry finds you repugnant. He must have first thought you were having an affair with his wife. Then he somehow discovered it was even worse than that, because it could cost him a fortune. When did you tell him?"

"When the little shit accused me of sleeping with Moria. I set him straight. His jaw dropped to China."

"It was when I saw a family portrait sitting on Moria's dresser that I realized the truth. The resemblance between the two of you--"

"How could you see a family portrait? This house was cleared out long before you ever got here."

"When I reviewed the pictures of the crime scene. In one of the pictures of Moria's body, you can see-- Detective! Do not strike me, or you will pay a terrible price."

Carrington had risen from his seat, his fist raised. He stopped. There was not a trace of bluff in Ari's words. "What, you're going to sic your Mafioso worms on me? Do

I look like I give a shit?"

"I give you credit for common sense. You haven't heard me out. I can assure you that beating me will only make me stubborn and silent."

"Those photos are police property."

"Another reason for you to sit quietly and listen. You have no idea of who else knows about this. Don't you want to find out?"

Suddenly, the detective took his gun off the table, pressed it to Ari's temple, and pressed the trigger.

There was a click.

"Oops. Forgot to load the damn thing." He leaned over Ari's shoulder. "Hmm. You didn't piss your pants."

"They're new. I wouldn't want to ruin them." Ari took in a long but discreet lungful of air. He had misjudged Carrington's sadistic streak. It was quite a bit longer than he had suspected. "Would you please sit?"

Carrington sat. The weight in his eyes had grown heavier. His show of power had given him no pleasure. It had, in fact, drained him. Ari wondered if he might not fold his arms on the table, lay down his head, and fall asleep.

"I can't tell you how I came by those pictures. Only that they provided me with the final pieces. I know what happened that night."

The detective watched him carefully, as if he wasn't handcuffed.

"At around five o'clock on December 23, neighbors heard a loud argument and banging at the Riggins house. Some of those neighbors chose to ignore what they assumed was a private domestic dispute. Another neighbor watched the house closely,

waiting for any sign that things had gotten out of hand. Things quieted down, but the neighbor kept an eye out--if for no other reason than out of concern for his property."

"Howie."

"He had seen Jerry steal a sledgehammer out of his shed. He must have noticed a peculiar look on Jerry's face and decided not to confront him about it. Then he heard the banging. He couldn't see what was happening through the trees and must have assumed Jerry would return the sledgehammer when he was done. But night came, and Jerry didn't come back."

"If Jerry did this, why wouldn't Moria call the police?"

"Because she had a large stash of cocaine in the house, and she was on the verge of getting more. I believe she had found someone who was willing to buy beyond the going price. She was going to make a big 'score', as they say in your country."

"She didn't need money."

"She might have felt the need for money, which comes to the same thing. This would be especially true after her father disinherited her."

"Jesus."

"You knew about that."

"I just can't believe *you* know."

"She was bartering her jewelry for drugs, so there had to have been some stress on their financial situation." Ari paused. "Remember the family portrait on Moria's dresser? It appeared to have been taken in the Massington home. In the background was a painting by Matisse. Mr. Massington might have had a fondness for modern art. Perhaps he began funding Jerry's exhibits because he had faith in his rising star. But once it

became apparent that Jerry could only repeat himself, he stopped. That was when Jerry became angry and told him you were his daughter's real father. Hence the disinheritance and the sudden end of Moria's allowance."

Ari found this last sentence felicitous and nodded to himself.

"Moria was familiar with the drug world through her friend, Tina Press," Ari continued. "She decided she could make up the loss in income by buying large quantities of 'product' and reselling it at various cooperative taverns. She laundered the income through Moria's Notions. She felt fairly safe. After all, her father was keeping an eye out for her."

"I tried to make her stop."

"As any good father would. But while Moria felt secure outside, she was afraid for the lives of herself and children in her own home. Jerry's behavior had become more erratic as galleries refused to display his art based on merit alone, without rental fees. She bought a gun to protect herself and hid it in the small water-control cabinet near the front door. The outlet to the yard had probably been switched off for the winter. It was unlikely Jerry would find it. So she felt safe that night after she locked Jerry out of the house. Even if he managed to break back inside, she had the gun to protect her. Except Jerry had found the gun. He had hidden it under the gazebo floorboards."

"You still have five or six hours unaccounted for, between the door business and the murders."

"When Jerry broke through, Moria ran for the gun and found it missing. She had no idea where it was, and if she tried to run away, Jerry could easily shoot her and the boys. So she played for time. She calmed him down. Perhaps they even made love.

The boys, who had been terrified by all of this, were reassured. They were told to dress for bed--small boys never do such things voluntarily. They sat in Joshua's room, which was the only one with a TV, and watched television or played computer games. No one told them to switch them off and go to sleep. So they played far into the night."

"Why would they be fighting in the first place?"

"Jerry was on a hairtrigger. Two things conspired to set him off that night. I don't know what the first was. Perhaps Moria had made a disparaging remark about his paintings. A frustrated artist would be sure to overreact, especially with the criticism coming from his lifemate. This was perhaps the first time Moria had given her opinion about the smudges. In any event, the house settled down. Jerry might have even gone to bed. Did you notice the shirt he was wearing when he was killed? No buttons, quite baggy...as much of a pajama top as a regular shirt. And he was wearing no socks under his shoes.

"Moria did not go to bed. She suspected--perhaps even somehow knew--the Kayak Express would be running that night. Perhaps it was normal for them to put in an appearance the day before Christmas, to sell product to holiday revelers. A busy time. Unfortunately, Moria did not have their cell phone number, or she would have advised the kayakers not to set off their rockets that night. Perhaps she did not understand the risk she was taking. If Jerry could not be accepted as an artist, he could at least be seen as a local celebrity known for his good works. Even if his donations had dried up after the loss of Moria's allowance, his standing in the community lingered. That the money came from his father-in-law made no difference. He was the public face.

"Think of the storm of mockery that would fall upon Jerry and his family if they

were arrested for distributing cocaine. Not only were the Rigginses no better than anyone else, they were a bit deal worse. But while this might have been preying on Jerry's mind, it was only a minor contribution to the final tragedy.

"Moria, still awake, is waiting for the Kayak Express. She was as desperate as her husband, and in her desperation she took the fatal step that killed her. To steady her rattled nerves, and to make certain she was awake when the Express came, she used cocaine.

"Near midnight, the Whistling Jupiters go off above the island. Moria runs outside. But the noise wakes Jerry. He puts on his trousers and shoes and goes out to the gazebo. When the kayakers arrive, he is there to threaten them with the very gun Moria had bought from them. She calms him down temporarily and reassures him she will not buy any more product. He retreats to the porch and watches. She asks the kayakers to come back in a little while, after things have settled down.

"In the meantime, William has gone to bed. Joshua is alone in his room, when he is attracted to the sound of movement. He goes into his parents' bedroom and sees they are gone. He hears talking outside and looks out the master bedroom window. He sees his parents talking to the kayakers. He's a curious boy. He runs back to his bedroom and puts on his robe and slippers. He's going to go outside. But when he gets downstairs, he sees a small plastic bag filled with white powder sitting on the living room coffee table. 'Isn't that the stuff Mom takes whenever she feels upset?' Of course, Moria would never have indulged herself while the boys were around, but it's possible Joshua saw her taking the drug without her knowledge. He might even have noticed how his mother seemed more alert and lively afterwards. He takes the bag and goes back upstairs. William hears

his brother shuffling around in the next room and rejoins him. They wonder if the powder will keep them awake all night tomorrow so they can greet Santa Claus in person. There's only one way to find out.

"The parents are back in bed. Moria pretends to sleep, hoping her husband will nod off before the kayakers return. But Jerry hears a noise in Joshua's room and gets up to investigate. Moria, pretending to sleep, keeps pretending.

"Jerry goes into Joshua's room and finds Joshua holding his brother against his chest. William is having a seizure. Jerry sees the envelope on the bed and realizes what has happened. He hesitates to call for an ambulance, because he knows that any doctor will report what has happened to the police, and the last shred of hope for whatever dreams he might have had will be gone. He shouts for Moria, then races into the bathroom. He returns with a facecloth soaked with cold water, a glass of water, and his wife's prescription bottle of Valium. He is going to try to reduce William's heart rate. Perhaps he gives a pill to Joshua, too, because he is sitting wide-eyed on the bed. He's not in very good shape, either. But it was too late."

"I can't be certain of this, of course, because the results from the coroner's report have been withheld from me, just as they were withheld from the newspaper. But judging from what I saw in the pictures, I think my conclusion is reasonable: William was the first of the Riggins to die, and it was not due from a gunshot. The traces of blood and mucous on Joshua's shirt, where he had held his brother against his chest, seem to indicate a hemorrhage.

"Jerry is sobbing by now. He tells Joshua that his brother has fallen asleep. He carries William to his room and puts him in bed, pulling up the covers to his chin.

"He can't believe it. For years he has lived in a fantasy world. Reality is coming down all around him. And now his son is dead and he knows it's as much his fault as Moria's, because he knew all along about her drug dealings. So...is it all over?"

"He is not sure what he will do next. But a man in his situation often chooses nihilism. It's a concept I'm sympathetic with. He takes the gun from wherever he put it after his encounter with the kayakers and returns to the bedroom--to find Moria sitting up in bed, looking out the window, obviously waiting for the return of her dealers. He says something to her, or perhaps he says nothing. Perhaps she never knew that William had died of a drug overdose.

"After Jerry shoots her, he goes to Joshua's room. Joshua has begun to remove his robe, which was wet with his brother's blood. He can see his father is distraught. He has heard the shot that killed his mother. His father tells him to look away, and then shoots him in the side of the head.

"Jerry goes into William's room. He shoots the body, hoping to disguise the real cause of death.

"Then he goes downstairs, turns the easy chair around, and sits, watching the river. The Moon. Filling himself with final sights. He is unaware that Howie Nottoway has put in an anonymous call to Crimestoppers."

Carrington had slumped in further and further into the uncomfortable chair as Ari recited his case. Now he jerked up. "It was Howie?"

"You didn't think the Matt and Tracy Mackenzie would involve themselves, did you?"

"It was a cell phone. Someone on the river could have called."

"The only people on the river that night were Mother's boys. When they returned, they heard a gunshot. They thought Jerry was firing at them and they fled. Yes, it was Jerry. He had shot himself."

"And the 'accomplices'?" Carrington asked lowly.

"You were on duty that night and heard the call go out to Jackson and Mangioni. Recognizing the address, you raced out here out of concern for your daughter. When you ran up the front sidewalk, you saw Jerry's body through the picture window. You circled the house, your weapon drawn, looking for any signs of a break-in. You did not call for backup because you assumed the worst: that your daughter's drug-dealings had gotten her killed.

"You saw the damaged back door and entered. You went upstairs and found what I have described. At first you thought it was the action of murderous intruders. Then you saw the gun lying next to Jerry and knew the truth.

"Your daughter might have been the result of an affair with Heather Massington, but you loved her dearly nonetheless. You couldn't bear the thought that she had been murdered by her own husband. Further investigation would have unveiled her crimes. You had to get rid of the gun quickly in order to support the story that intruders had committed the murders. You didn't dare take the gun out to your car because you didn't know who might be watching. And a patrol unit would be arriving at any moment. You saw the central air vent at the top of the wall. You used the same stepping stool Jerry had used while decorating the top of his tree and dropped his gun in the ductwork. Then you turned and saw Jackson and Mangioni watching you through the window. You told them what had happened and convinced them the intruder story was for the best. Nothing

could bring back the dead, and the killer had committed suicide. They might wonder why you cared so much about the family's good name, but they went along with your plan. The result is that, to this day, the crime has gone 'unsolved.'"

Carrington roused himself out of his chair and went over to the refrigerator. He opened it and stared inside. He took out a small bottle and frowned at it. "What the hell, liquid yoghurt?"

"It's quite good."

"Bottled vomit." He closed the door and turned to Ari. "So now you've solved your little mystery, who do you plan to tell about it?"

"No one," said Ari.

"I can't believe that."

"You'll have to trust me."

"Or kill you."

"Why? I see no reason to threaten your daughter's reputation. What good could that do?"

"And you'll stay quiet about the Kayak Express? It's more complicated than you let on."

"Killing me wouldn't be feasible," said Ari reluctantly, knowing he would have to go further than he originally intended.

"Why not? I know a million hiding places to put your body."

"You would shoot me here? Don't you think it would be better to choose a spot away from the prying eyes of the Neighborhood Watch?" Ari's grin unsettled the

detective.

"Like in the middle of the woods? Yeah, why not?"

"You would have to take my car with you, to explain my absence from the house."

"No problem."

"But that's actually more complicated than you have imagined, Detective Sergeant Carrington. My body would be located within minutes. The U.S. Marshals Service has incorporated a LoJack device in the frame of my car."

"Fuck!" Carrington picked up the empty chair and slammed it to the floor. "I knew it! Fuck!"

"Even if you shot me and dumped me in the river, the Federal government would bring together all their resources to track the killer."

"You think they care that much about some made-guy asshole?"

"It would be a matter of national security. They'd have to assume Iraqi agents had penetrated their security."

"Iraqi?" The detective dwelled on this, the weight coming back down on his eyes. He picked up the chair, checked it over for damage, then sat across from Ari. "What do you want to tell me?"

"Open that envelope."

Carrington took up the envelope on the table, studied the commercial return address, and opened it. A USB flash drive fell out.

"That was left for me. You're lucky the delivery man did not meet Howie, who I believe would have provided a very inadequate explanation as to why he was in my

house and pulling out my stove. Can you connect that to your Blackberry?"

"No."

"Then go upstairs and use my computer. I won't go anywhere."

"Right. What's on it?"

"Obscenities."

"Iraqi porn?"

"Pictures of atrocities. Men dragged away from their homes in the middle of the night or in broad daylight. Men tortured and murdered. Men ambushed on the road or in their offices. And the men who did the killing. They often make home movies of their crimes. They wear disguises, usually kuffiah scarves, but sometimes I can see through their masks."

"And report back to...?"

"CENTCOM. That's United States Central--"

"I know what it is." Carrington flipped the flash drive between his fingers, as though toying with a napkin ring at a dull dinner party.

Ari looked closely for any sign of inner resignation that this was all over, that he and Carrington could go their separate ways. He had already put a message in the pipeline for assistance, but in the hope he would not need it.

"I just can't let it go," Carrington shook his head. "You're like a gun at my head. At Moria's head."

"My word is my honor."

In this case, at least.

"The honor of a man spying on his own people. That's rich. Okay, I can't kill you

without incurring a major inconvenience. But I can still cut you off at the balls. I have contacts with the news media. A little call to Twelve On Your Side about a spy setting up shop in one of our more respectable neighborhoods would blow this game wide open. You're a real threat to the community. What if a bunch of Arab assassins shows up and starts shooting rockets every which way? They don't care who they hit, so long as they finally get you. And then there's this number in fucking Iceland, of all places."

Of all places....

"You can't say I wouldn't be doing the right thing. I'd be helping the press with some of that goddamn freedom they love so much. Even if the U.S. Marshal found the leak, I would be acclaimed as a good citizen."

"And the Kayak Express?"

"Black Mamma wouldn't sell me out. If she did, she'd lose her little white sugar cubes, and she can't live without her sugar."

Ari believed him.

"Can you give me a chance to set this straight before you do that?"

"Sell me," said Carrington.

"I have been responsible for saving many American lives."

"How many is 'many'?"

"I don't know the exact number. I've been told--"

"Hearsay. Great. Are you out there now, giving mouth to mouth to some poor slob? Are you gunning down the enemy? Exactly how many *bad* guys have you ID'd?"

"Twenty-seven, if you include my work in-country."

Carrington sat back. "That many?"

"Yes."

"And they were legit? You didn't finger them just because you didn't like their dog barking at night? I hear that's a popular pastime over there, using G.I.'s to settle personal scores."

"I've 'liked' very few people in my life. Most of them are dead. But no, I haven't sent any of them to prison without just cause. I wouldn't want my worst enemy in an Iraqi prison."

"How many bad guys have been arrested, and or otherwise?"

"Because of me? Four were killed in combat. Four were executed by the Iraqi government. Five are in Abu Ghraib."

"A place where you wouldn't want your worst enemy. Thirteen out of twenty-seven. Not bad, and I guess those are the only ones you know about."

"Yes."

"What do you suggest?"

"I want you to meet my handler."

"A U.S. Marshal?"

"She is a deputy. She'll be able to set your mind at ease. After all, it would not be in your nation's interest if my services were...nullified."

"Sounds like a sting."

"If you were arrested, you would expose me in the courtroom."

Carrington mulled this over.

"You want to meet at her office?"

"I doubt Miss Sylvester would agree to that. Security issues. Besides, I don't

know where her office is. Perhaps a restaurant...?"

"Then I choose the time and place," the detective said abruptly.

"I need some lead time. I'm sure she has other duties."

"All right. I'll give you a couple of days. I've got your cell phone number. And by the way, we'll use my car. I don't want any of that LoJack shit around."

And why should that matter if the woman we're going to meet is the same one who has been tracking me?

"Agreed," said Ari.

Carrington stood slowly, looking exhausted. He tossed the key to the handcuffs on the table. "I know you've got some guns floating around here. By the time you get those cuffs off, I'll be gone."

EIGHTEEN

Ari stood in his driveway and bent over, planting his palms flat on the pavement. He extended one leg, then brought it back and extended the other. His muscles relished the warm-up, though it had been a couple of days since he had exercised. He adapted well to changes in scene and situation.

"Abu Karim Ghaith Ibrahim no longer exists. Do you understand?"

Ghaith--no, Ari Ciminon--looked to the north, where the World Trade Center had once stood. He felt a sense of vacancy that had nothing to do with the missing towers.

"I understand that 'Ghaith Ibrahim' would be a great embarrassment to the Great Satan."

"We're talking basic survival here."

"So am I. I am to become an erasure. I no longer exist."

"Good, you understand."

As he jogged up Beach Court Lane, he kept one eye peeled for Sphinx. There was no sign of the cat lurking at the edge of the woods or in neighboring yards. *Enjoy your freedom, little beast.*

He turned left onto Riverside Drive and the straight stretch of road that ran between the river and the houses situated high on the bluff. A car roared past at a blistering forty miles per hour, twenty beyond the posted speed limit. Ari shouted an oath in its wake.

'American History 101.'

'My country 'tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty...'

Liberty. You had to crack a few legal codes to find liberty around here. Like the driver of that speeding car. He knew what it took: flagrant disregard of the rules. You might have to pay a few fines, but there was plenty of liberty for those who could afford it.

He passed the entrance to the Pony Pasture, part of the James River Park System.

'Do Not Park Overnight. Unleashed Dogs Not Allowed. Do Not Litter. Do Not Pick Plants.'

A loose dog ran into the trash-strewn parking lot past an abandoned car. The dog's owner trotted up, a bouquet of wildflowers in her hand.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," Ari smiled without breaking his stride. He avoided entering that section of the park, which terminated at a private golf course prominently littered with 'No Trespassing' signs.

'Let Freedom Ring!'

It wasn't about WMD. It wasn't about oil. It wasn't a new hegemony. It was all about freedom. But Iraqis understood 'freedom from'. Freedom from torture, freedom from censorship, freedom from being spied upon, freedom from...well, not freedom from want, Ari amended as he ran past two homeless men under the Huguenot Bridge. That was a 'freedom to'. Freedom to starve, freedom to be unemployed, freedom to hanker after the unattainable.

'The bombs bursting in air...'

Peace-loving American loved war so much it was incorporated in their National

Anthem. But every society was a bundle of contradictions. Look at the Baathists. So many good intentions, all of them ending up on the chopping block.

In order to live you had to die.

In order to live in freedom you needed chains.

In order to exist you must end existence.

Only by ending could you see the beginning.

Ari wondered if he was turning Sufi. A good mystical consensus to the nothingness around them. That was what he needed.

But some practical measures had to be taken, first. Did his message get through? Or did Sandra and her cohorts intercept it? Who would be waiting for him at the end of his run?

'...one Nation, under God...'

No, no, it's not about religion. Americans are a secular crew. Don't begin each day at your new Shaabiya Satellite TV station with a prayer to Allah, you foolish Iraqis. That's too backward. Start it with—

Wait, who did I just pledge allegiance to?

Ari's logical mind tumbled across the miles. He detoured around Willow Oaks, used Forest Hill to cross Powhite, and swung back down towards the river.

Am I a traitor? Am I savior? Am I like everybody else—just trying to get by?

He crossed Westover Hills Boulevard and returned to Riverside, continuing east until he came to James River Park's 42nd Street entrance. After crossing the railway tracks, he turned right at Reedy Creek and headed up the broad trail. Birds fluttered in the bushes. Squirrels skittered out of his path. The dogs of joggers coming the other way

gave him passing nose jobs.

Am I Arab? Persian? Assyrian? Babylonian? Am I all? Or none? Am I...human? It's not a frivolous question.

He climbed the steps of the 22nd Street platform and crossed Belvedere.

Rana. Rana. Rana.

He passed the massive, coldly precise financial buildings on Riverview Parkway, then entered upon (how appropriate!) the old Slave Trail.

'With liberty and justice for all.'

'Oh say can you see.'

'Mission accomplished.'

'By the dawn's early light.'

In the shadow of the Manchester Bridge, he ran past the massive abutments and crumbled arches of its predecessors, now used for climbing practice. Rappellers tossed their ropes down, draping the old brick superstructure like scrappy Rapunzels letting down their long scraggly hair.

Who will be waiting for me? Sandra, with a bruised smirk? Carrington, with less than a smile, his hand filled with a SIG Sauer? The FBI? The CIA? Die-hards from the Mukhabarat? The Canadian Mounties? A hit squad from Amnesty International? Why, I could end up in The Hague, right next to Slobodan Milosevic. But wait, he died back in March. Wonder where he is now? Where do atheists end up? No Heaven. No hell. Just sewage.

His crimes were not so very extreme...by Iraqi standards. It was a sorry consolation.

He went down a rocky slope, then up a ramp onto the southern section of the Canal Walk. Constructed by the 'Corps of Engineers'. Maybe they would be the ones waiting for him, ready to haul him off on one of their cranes. The ghost of Jerry Riggins at the controls.

'We hold these truths to be self-evident...'

'I am not a crook.'

'Ask not, what your country can do for you...'

Ari had asked what he could do for his country. You couldn't do that sort of thing on your own. Could not just build a school or kill an enemy or make a friend without consultation. The country determined what was needed. He had been told what to do, and he had done it...most of it. The secret agenda of Nuremburg. Obey commands unless, no matter, not ever, on occasion.

'I have a dream...'

Rana...

Ari zigzagged his way along the floodwall, his lungs bursting. He almost fell down the steps at the end. He noted a dusky, busy street, across which lay a railway museum encrusted by chain link fences topped with barbed wire. After only the briefest of pauses, he forged the 14th Street traffic and ascended the next segment of the floodwall.

Thought left him. Whether pragmatic or drearily amorphous, facts and theories dissolved in a fog of pain. There was nothing metaphysical about it. This was sheer physical agony. He was only vaguely aware of the floodwall petering out beneath his feet. After that came Manchester Road. Then Brander Street. To his left was a massive

stone levee that looked hot and sterile, followed by a layer of trees that screened the river from view. Then he saw the entrance to Ancarow's Landing and staggered into the parking lot.

He fell to his knees, sobbing for air.

"How far have you run?" a voice asked.

"I...I...about...six..."

"Six miles? Is that all?"

"Maybe...seven. Maybe...eight."

"The Ghaith I knew could run 20 kilometers without breaking a sweat."

"That Ghaith...is dead."

"Looks like it."

Ari began to laugh. "Do you want...to help...me up?"

"Of course, Sir."

A pair of arms descended. A moment later, Ari found himself within inches of an astonishingly familiar face. Both men embraced and kissed each others' cheeks, laughing.

"You look terrible."

"You look worse," the man answered in Arabic.

They laughed and embraced again. They had not seen each other in so long.

"*Et comment est Montréal ces jours ci, mon ami?*" said Ari.

"Don't start that on me, again. My French is my French, which is no French at all."

"Get any peculiar looks up there?"

"All the time."

Ari laughed loudly, as though the world had come home to him. "You brought your son with you?"

"Mahmoud is in the van. I thought the fewer faces out here, the better.

"A wise precaution," Ari nodded. "We have to prepare."

"That's what I'm here for," said the man. He knew better than to ask about Rana or Karim. He also understood it was pointless to ask if what they were about to do was dangerous. He turned and looked across the river at the city. "Nice little town."

"Yes," said Ari. "Very scenic."

"Do the Abu Ghraib Shimmy for me," said Carrington.

"I'm sorry?"

"Strip."

"I'm not concealing a gun."

"I'm more concerned about a wire. I'm taking us to a place where only the bears have transmitters. But to be on the safe side...strip."

"I have to make my call to Ms. Sylvester."

"This first."

"If I refuse?"

"Then there's no agreement and it's every man for himself."

Ari sighed and began to undress. The idea of being naked before a stranger did not bother him unduly. As a young man he had spent several years in an army barracks, where privacy was practically nonexistent.

"You really want this meeting, don't you?" Carrington said as Ari draped his jacket over the kitchen chair and removed his tie. "If you asked me to strip, I'd drop you."

"There's nothing to like or dislike. It's a matter of necessity."

"Some necessities are pleasant." The police detective had turned his chair around and sat with his hands folded over the back. He had finally discovered a comfortable position.

"I suppose it all balances out."

"Yeah," Carrington agreed. "The trick is in the balance."

"It's just as the ancient Greeks said, moderation--"

"Fuck the Greeks. Come to think of it, keep the trousers on. I don't think they'd use your dick for a microphone. But take off the undershirt."

Ari obliged.

"So you're not wired."

"I can do the rest, if you want," said Ari.

"You aren't acting like a man in a hurry," said Carrington, lifting his chin off his hands. "Get your stuff back on, and hurry."

Ari dressed.

"Now make the call to your Federal girl."

Ari took up his cell phone and began to dial.

"Wait. You don't have her number in speed dial?"

Ari shrugged. "I haven't figured that out, yet."

"You? Hang up and hand it over."

Ari disconnected and handed the cell phone to the detective. He studied the buttons for a moment, then checked the speed dial list.

"No numbers in Memory." He looked up at Ari. "That could be a precaution on your part. You're not stupid."

"I'm not a technological genius, either."

"What's the number?"

"Ms. Sylvester's?"

"No, Saddam Hussein's. Who do you think?"

Ari reached for the phone.

"No, I'll dial."

Giving him a long look, Ari said, "She won't recognize your voice."

"And I won't recognize hers. We'll be even."

Ari began to recite the number. Carrington held up a hand.

"Stop. That's not the U.S. Marshals local office number. I checked."

"Then you also checked to make certain Ms. Sylvester is one of their agents. I'm giving you her cell number."

Carrington shook his head in disgust. "In bed with the Feds. Makes me want to puke out my still-beating heart." Carrington hesitated, then put the phone on the table.

"Let me see that jacket."

Ari had just donned his sports jacket again. He slipped it off and handed it over.

"Please don't wrinkle--"

"Dressing kind of fancy for all this, aren't you?"

"I don't know where we're going. It could be a fashionable restaurant."

"A fashionable restaurant in Richmond!" Carrington ground the jacket between his hands, checked the pockets, and gave it back. "Can't be too careful."

Ari looked at the wrinkled lump. When he put it back on, he was woefully disheveled.

"Now, what's that number?" He punched it in as Ari spoke. Almost immediately, a woman's voice came on.

"Sylvester."

"This is Ari Ciminon's friend. The one you're going to meet tonight."

"Where is he?" asked the woman.

"Right here. Shout something for the lady."

"Everything is going according to plan," Ari shouted.

"You heard?"

"Yes," said the woman.

"I'm going to give you directions instead of relaying them through Ari here. Got a pen and paper?"

"Yes."

"You know the town of Cumberland?"

"On Route 60?"

"Yeah."

"That's almost fifty miles away!"

"You got a problem with distance, Deputy Sylvester?"

"No, no. All right, take 60 to Cumberland..."

"Just before you get there, you'll see a sign for Bear Creek Lake Park. Or Bear

Lake Creek Park. I always get that name mixed up."

"I know where it is. Isn't that--"

"Follow the signs until you reach the park entrance. The road forks. Go right, towards Cumberland State Forest. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Keep going about a mile--hey, is Bret Mason still picking his nose?"

There was a pause at the other end. "I'm not at liberty to discuss our personnel," said the woman.

"Good girl," said Carrington.

Good girl, thought Ari.

"Keep going until you see a sign for Arrowhead Lake. Turn right on the dirt road and keep going to the end. There's a small parking area and a suspension footbridge. You'll see us there."

"All right."

"You got all that down?"

"I think so..."

"Make sure you *know* so. You don't sound very confident for a Federal Agent."

The detective chuckled. "Actually, you sound exactly like a Fed."

He disconnected. Glancing at Ari's trousers, he said, "Pull up your pants legs."

Ari did so, exposing his tall beige socks.

"Higher."

Ari brought the cuffs up past his calves.

"Okay, you're not strapped. You're not wired. You're not LoJacked. Guess we're

ready to go."

Once they were past the town of Midlothian the road opened up. At the same time, they were closed in by darkness. It was almost midnight. There were very few cars on the road. They passed the small intersection of Flat Rock without seeing anyone.

After openly admiring the Lexus, Ari fell silent, letting Carrington concentrate on the road. He thought the detective was going to drive the whole distance without saying a word, until he said, "I envy you."

"How so?"

"A cop in Iraq. That's real power, or it was until we got there. I hate those mealy-mouthed Europeans and their crappy system. I visited England and saw a bobby getting mugged at King's Cross. Not a police firearm in sight. It was disgusting. But in Iraq, if you didn't shoot the bad guy on sight, you knew he would get his due in prison. I mean, I don't know a lot about it, but from what I can tell, the law really meant something."

"Yes..."

"You don't know how much the average cop here would like to crack a few skulls. Nothing fatal, just a concussion here and there. But we whip out a stick and *wham*, a lawsuit."

"I seem to recall a fellow named Rodney King," said Ari.

"Who deserved every lick he took. Sure, things get out of hand, sometimes. But we've got the best system in the world. It's just gone wimpy, that's all. I hate to see it. Now, that guy who took out those badasses at the Chinese deli, he was from the old school. Shoot first and fuck the questions." Carrington cocked his eyes toward the

passenger side. "Come on, own up. You were the triggerman, weren't you? I won't tell anyone. Hell, I'll stop right here and kiss your ass. You don't see anything like that anymore. It's Old Testament."

Ari did not speak for a few moments, then observed: "You have many trees here."

"Aw, fuck the trees. Virginia's one big woodshed. Should have named it fucking Treeville."

"The nearest we have to something like this is in the Zagros."

"So what was it like, being a cop in Iraq? You must've been somebody, with the U.S. Government so hot for you and all. How many bad guys did you plug?"

Ari watched the trees in the headlights for a quarter of a mile. He wished it was day. It must be a lovely sight.

"Detective Sergeant, have you ever heard of *al-Amn al-Khas*?"

"No. Should I have?"

"No, I guess not." Ari watched some house lights float by like glowing buoys. A farmstead on a hill?

"So?"

"They were only an organization of clerks. I was one of them."

Carrington seemed to fall into a sulk. If he was hoping for a bit of international cop-bonding, he was sorely disappointed.

They had both taken a turn at sparking conversations, but neither had chosen a topic the other was interested in discussing. The grim hum of the engine and background hiss of tires on tarmac filled the car like white noise. Carrington switched on the radio. The dial was set on a classic rock station. They listened to one minute of 'With Or

Without You', the song spliced with static. They were already at the limit of the station's transmitter. Rather than scan for a clearer signal, the detective turned the radio off.

"I'm not in the mood and it's not your type of music," he said.

"True," said Ari.

"I guess you like that sitar-woozy stuff."

"I think you're referring to Indian music. Which I happen to like. There are a lot of similarities between Indian and Arabic music."

"I wouldn't know," said Carrington drearily, then perked up. "But you've heard of the big names here, I'm sure. How about the Eagles?"

"No. Have you heard of Nancy Ajram? Very big."

"Uh...no.

"She's Lebanese. Very recent, extremely popular. You would call her a superstar. My boys are very keen on..."

"Hey, you okay? It's just music. Okay, how about Bob Dylan. You've got to know him."

"I'm afraid not."

"What are you, a bunch of savages? The whole world knows Bob Dylan. He did a concert in Bangladesh. Or *for* Bangladesh. You know, to get money for typhoon victims or flood victims or some mega-disaster like that. Come on, think. 'Dust in the Wind', 'Here Comes the Sun', the theme from Titanic..."

"No. None of those sound familiar."

"I thought music was supposed to be universal," Carrington groused in philosophical disappointment.

"On the contrary," said Ari, a little pedantically. "Music and humor are the two least universal forms of culture."

"You don't think Eddie Murphy's funny? Everybody thinks Eddie Murphy's funny." The detective waited in vain for an answer. "I guess that big yapping silence means you never heard of Eddie Murphy."

"I *have* heard of one of your comedians. Do you know someone named Jerry Lewis?"

Carrington nearly swerved off the road.

"So instead of an Arab asshole I've got a French asshole here."

"I don't understand," said Ari.

"Forget it. Jesus, is that it? Jerry Lewis is it? That's all we have in common?"

"If there was time, I'm sure we could find more," Ari sighed.

"Yeah, like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones."

"Oh yes, I know them."

"Great, the Brits. I guess they've got everyone by the balls."

"Tea and football," Ari agreed.

"You mean soccer." Carrington sought out a mental vision of his high school geography teacher. "The Brits pretty much laid out Iraq the way it is now, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Us too."

"I admire the Queen, though," Ari continued.

"She's Mick Jagger in drag," said Carrington.

Ari chuckled.

"Hey, we got it! Music and humor!" Carrington paused. "So this agency you worked for, Om Kas Whatever...they're all clerks? They must be clerking for somebody. I mean, you don't just have clerks with nothing attached. We've got bank clerks, Wal-Mart clerks, 7/11 clerks..."

"I worked for the government."

"Okay, a government clerk. We've got IRS clerks, DMV clerks, CIA clerks..."

"I handled files."

"A file clerk. I understand that. I can see why our government would be interested in someone like that. You know, someone who filed all the dirt. That could be real national-interest stuff. But what happened at the Chinese store...that was no clerk."

"That wasn't me," Ari repeated.

"And this isn't my sore ass," Carrington said, shifting in his seat.

They passed a mileage sign. Cumberland, eight miles.

They bypassed the entrance to Bear Creek Lake State Park and followed Oak Hill Road to Cumberland State Forest. The hi-beams struggled to carve a tunnel of light as they left the macadam and forged onto a gravel road. Ari noted a sign hanging from a post.

"Arrowhead Lake," he said.

"Yeah." Carrington did not turn off, but continued straight.

The headlights picked out dust-covered bushes on the roadside. Here and there startled eyes peered out from under the trees before darting away into the underbrush.

"Don't fret," said Carrington, sensing Ari's anxious gaze. "We'll be meeting your

lady."

They came to a three-way intersection and Carrington turned. A small wood sign announced Willis River Road. This was less traveled than the other fire road, with more curves and hills. After descending a sharp slope, they came to a plank bridge that looked more suitable for hikers than motor vehicles. Carrington took it without hesitation. The boards rattled underneath the car. It was too dark to see how far they would drop if the bridge failed.

"Detective Sergeant, I think you're guilty of abusing your very nice car."

"It's okay so long as I go slow," said Carrington. "But you're right, it's mainly four-wheelers that you'll see on these roads. Good ol' boys. Know the phrase?"

"I spent some time around American troops. I believe many of them are 'good ol' boys!'"

"I believe you're right. I better not catch any of them back here spotlighting tonight."

"I'm not familiar with that phrase."

"A deer can't see when a spotlight hits. It freezes. That's when the hunter shoots him. It's illegal."

"Interesting."

"Stick with me. You'll learn American."

"I don't think there'll be enough time for that," Ari answered.

"What, they're shipping you back? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I won't be going back to Iraq. I think my handler might move me out of the Riggins house after this meeting. She'll think it's no longer secure."

"To another state?"

"And with another name."

"Shit on that."

"Yes," said Ari.

A building loomed ahead.

"A black Baptist Church," said Carrington.

"Black? I don't understand."

"Out here, the blacks go to their churches, the whites go to theirs. Pretty much the same in the city, too."

"I thought everything here was..."

"Integrated? Not when it comes to churches." He grinned as he turned back onto a different forest lane. Jim Birch Road. "Doesn't feel so much like a melting pot now, does it?"

At this slow speed it was difficult to gauge how far they had travelled. Ari estimated they had gone nearly two miles from the church when they came to a turnaround.

"End of the road." Carrington pointed ahead. "There's the bridge. Your lady friend will come in from that side."

"Will you be going to her or will she be coming to us?"

"Cm'on, even a desk cop can see the layout." Carrington studied his watch. "She crosses, we talk. But first, I'll need to see if she's wired."

"But that means--"

"Yeah. Enjoy the show." He pulled out his gun. "This is just insurance. I won't

say that I don't trust you, but that's just not saying it."

"I don't think Ms. Sylvester will agree to being strip-searched."

"Then the meeting will end before it begins, and I'll be contacting the gentlemen of the press."

The SIG Sauer did not bother Ari, but a powerful sorrow filled him. "Detective Sergeant, there's no need to tell anyone about my presence. Or about..."

"Iceland?"

"Exactly."

"Who's there?" Carrington asked. "Relatives?"

"My wife and son."

"Why aren't they here with you?"

"I believe your government feels it can control me better if they remain at a distance."

"That's a pretty fucking big distance."

"As you say."

"Well...war is hell." He switched off his ignition and doused the headlights.

"We've still got some time. No sense burning gas."

There was a rush of water, presumably from a stream running under the footbridge. Ari thought of a canal thirty kilometers outside Baghdad, of three prisoners, of Karim, hands bound behind him, on his knees, looking up with hopeless vacancy at his father. A man had held a gun on him then, too. He did not think Carrington was trying to threaten or even impress him. But Ari was of the belief that a man should never take out a gun solely for the sake of insurance. His former leader had threatened Armageddon

to anyone who invaded his country, and his bluff had been called.

"I don't think you should envy the Iraqi policemen of the past," Ari said.

"Sure as hell don't envy them now," Carrington chuckled meanly.

"An Iraqi policeman had to toe the line. He had to close his eyes at his own doings." Ari grimaced at his awkward syntax, but Carrington did not notice.

"No different here," the detective said. "You don't produce, you get the ax."

"You also seem proud to be as evil as the Iraqis."

"I never said that."

"But you're proud of being dangerous."

"Being dangerous is good. It keeps the bad buys off your back."

Ari shook his head. "Then you behave no differently than we do."

"Hey, I boned up a little on your fearless leader," Carrington said heatedly.

"Saddam Hussein is one of the sickest sickos to ever live, let alone run a country. Can you see Bush inviting Rumsfeld to his office, then calling him outside and shooting him down because he'd gotten too popular?"

"I don't think Rumsfeld has to worry about that," said Ari.

"You miss my point. It's a matter of degree. Point to anything in your country, and you'll find the same thing here in one form or another, except maybe the President snuffing the Secretary of Defense. But we don't do it as bad as you do, if you know what I mean."

"You're a remote people," Ari countered. "You torture remotely. You kill remotely. From what I've seen on the internet, you even make love remotely."

"Crap."

"You threaten my relatives in Iceland. And how? Not by going there and doing the job yourself. You're willing to expose them to the media. It's guaranteed death."

"I have to protect myself," said Carrington. "And my family."

"So also I."

The atmosphere in the car became rank with suspicion and recrimination. Both of them loathed the others' presence and the circumstances that had brought them here. Ari felt--and sensed the same feeling in Carrington, if not for the same reason--that he would have done almost anything to avoid this. The Riggins family had imposed this on them. Dead, stretching out for anonymous infinity, they had attached themselves by a final ethereal thread to these two unhappy men. But the thread stretched much further than to Beach Court Lane, and they knew this as well.

Ari pushed back in his seat. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"I hope it's a whizz," said Carrington in a tired voice. "I don't have anything for a dump in this car. Or don't you use toilet paper?"

"Just a whizz," Ari said, automatically attaching the new word to his vocabulary.

"Don't go far. In fact, just stand right outside there and do it. But don't get any on the Lexus!"

Ari opened his door and swiveled his legs out. He leaned down.

"Hey! Not that close."

"My shoe's untied."

"Christ..." Carrington gripped the wheel and stared out ahead. "Just hurry it up. She should be here any minute."

"I can't see..."

"You can't tie your shoes in the dark? You raised in a zoo or something? I don't want to turn on the lights yet. Sometimes the park rangers come sniffing up this way."

"Just a moment...ah, there." Ari stood. There was a mild thump on the roof.

"Hey, don't lean on the car! I just had it waxed!"

"Very well."

The sound of Ari's urine striking the leaves chimed in with the rush of streamwater under the footbridge.

"I hear something," Ari said, zipping up.

Carrington turned on the power long enough to lower his window. He listened. In the distance an engine was starting up. It was followed a moment later by the roar of tires on gravel. The sound of the racing car faded in the distance.

"Spotlighters?" asked Ari.

"Chased off by the rangers?" Carrington thumped the steering wheel. "That would be just my fucking luck."

Carrington heard Ari move behind the car. "What are you doing?"

"Stretching my legs."

"Well come over here and stretch them where I can see them." Carrington shifted the gun on his lap as Ari came up on the driver's side.

"Detective Sergeant, I can barely see my own legs at the moment, and I believe they're still attached to me."

"No lights until I'm ready. I'm telling you, a ranger shows up, we're out of here."

"Very well."

"And whisper. Sound carries out here."

Sound carries everywhere.

But the long silence spooked both of them. Carrington coughed. Coughed again.

"Are you all right?" asked Ari.

"Just a scratch in my throat."

"You should have brought something to drink. Do you have a cup? I could bring some water from that stream."

"Don't tell me you can drink out of the Nile in your town."

"No," said Ari, not bothering to correct him. "It's too polluted."

"Same here." Carrington shifted in his seat. "So...what made you decide to become a cop?"

Ari peered into the dark. It was like looking into his own mind.

"I lied to you," he told the detective.

"Yeah? Which lie was that?"

"Krav Maga. That's Hebrew for 'close combat.'"

"So?"

"It's taught to Israeli security forces. I used that training to disarm the first robber--I didn't mean to kill him. After that, it was simply a matter of shooting the other two."

"Simple..."

"My point is that in Krav Maga it is assumed at the outset that no quarter will be given. If one of those young men had thrown down his gun and raised his hands, I would have killed him."

"I knew it. Congratulations." Carrington's voice carried a nervous trill. "But you

say you didn't mean to kill the first guy?"

"Or perhaps I did. The training took over. Perhaps I was no longer myself."

"So what are you, Ari: Jew, Arab, Italian or Nova Scotian?"

"A mongrel."

"And the Israelis are kind enough to teach mongrels hand-to-hand combat?"

"Years ago, a Palestinian who worked for Shabak--"

"Which is?"

"Israeli internal security. This Palestinian was found out and captured by Hezbollah. He stayed alive by passing on his training to other Arabs."

"All right." Carrington dug his fingernail into the top of the steering wheel.

"Any other confessions you want to share?"

"Al-Amn al-Khas. It is not an organization of clerks."

"No kidding."

"You could translate it as 'Special Security Service'. Our primary duty was to protect the president."

"The way you're talking, I guess that goes beyond just providing bodyguards."

"I was with the Amm Al-Khass Brigade, a branch of al-Amn al-Khas. Their specialty was suppressing rebellion. I killed my first man when I was twenty-three, during the attempted coup by the Jubur tribe, in 1990. I infiltrated the Republican Guard and eliminated undesirable elements. I helped suppress the Shiite rebellion of 1991. Remember the Marsh Arabs, the people you abandoned after the First Gulf War? But my personal specialty was the Kurdish enclaves. I killed suspected rebels. The Kurds never caught on, because I carried no weapons."

"With your bare hands..." Carrington said in a tight voice. "You're one hot potato, Mr. Ciminon."

"Abu Karim Ghaith Ibrahim. My last assignment is the reason I'm here. Saddam Hussein released tens of thousands of prisoners before the war, in the belief that they would cause the Americans endless trouble after the inevitable conquest. I was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior to be of the screeners. When I say I'm just a cop...in effect, that's what I ended up as."

"What, keeping tabs on those who went out?"

"No. Making sure that certain inmates were not released by accident. What you would call politically significant prisoners."

"And that's what you call a 'clerk'..." Carrington shook his head. "Maybe I should shoot you here and save the world some grief."

"I wonder..." Ari slumped against the car. "I did what I did for my country. And now my country no longer exists. Does that mean I no longer exist? Detective Sergeant...I mean to say...I am deeply ashamed. The things I have done...and now I have paid the price."

"You could...uh...you could join the Peace Corps...or something. You could...you know, like Oprah says, bring some good into the world--"

"Listen..."

Carrington fell silent. There was a soft jingling, followed by a creak of pressure.

Turn on the lights.

"Is someone on the bridge?" Carrington whispered.

"I'm not sure..."

There was the distinct sound of ropes rubbing against wood, followed by a palpable, hollow footstep.

Turn on the lights! I have to be able to see you!

"How big is this Sylvester girl? She must weigh a ton."

"We'll know soon enough if she falls off the bridge," Ari said tensely.

"What, she can't use a flashlight?" But Carrington could not stand the suspense. He turned the key and switched on his headlights. And froze. "What the fuck?" he said in a voice so tight it broke.

He heard movement and twisted around to see Ari standing at attention.

"What the fuck? What is this?"

A man was standing about a fifth of the way across the suspension footbridge, shading his eyes against the sudden glare. When he lowered his hand, Carrington said, "No. You're fucking me. This is a joke."

Ari did not speak.

The man resumed crossing the bridge, using a peculiar, gliding step that prevented the span from shaking. His lower body vanished gradually as he neared the center, where the bridge sank down, but began to appear again as drew nearer to the embankment.

"Fuck me," Carrington hissed, ogling the vision. "Jesus, it really looks...Jesus, it can't be."

"It is," Ari said out the side of his mouth. "Show some respect."

"You're trying to pull a fast one." Carrington leaned forward. "This can't..."

Lean forward a little more....

The dark beret, the olive-green uniform, the red epaulets and ridiculous red

holster. Everything Carrington had seen in the news.

"Fuck me...fuck me..."

The man neared the end of the footbridge, his hand gently floating along the rope handhold. He was having difficulty seeing the car, having been spotlighted--which had no doubt been done on purpose, though with Deputy Sylvester in mind.

Not Saddam Hussein.

One shot only. It can't be more.

Hussein stopped at the end of the bridge and slowly raised his arm, pointing at the car. His expression was canny, amused, menacing.

"Fuck me." Carrington pressed up against the steering wheel, peering through the windshield. Then a flicker of awareness came to him, and he said, "Loafers--"

But Ari already had the gun off the roof and against the detectives head. One fluid movement. He fired.

Blood and brain matter splattered against the seat and the passenger window. The body slid sideways across the shift.

"Done?" Saddam Hussein called out.

"Hold on."

Ari could see Carrington's face by the light from the dashboard, a blue, ghostly visage. He was still breathing. Tough old buzzard.

"Did Mahmoud put the stuff in the trunk?"

"Hold on!" Ari repeated peevishly. "And stay where you are! I don't want any more tracks around the car."

"Okay, Colonel."

Even if he was found alive, the detective would never speak again. But on this above all, Ari wanted certainty. And he could not use another bullet.

Come on, come on, don't make it harder than it has to be. You want that pension for your wife and kids, don't you? And if the police refuse them the money, for one reason or another, there's always the widows fund for the End of Watch list....

Blood dribbled out of Carrington's nose onto the passenger seat. One drop, two drops, then a trickle of red tears. Then he heaved a sigh, and the breathing stopped.

"Bring up--" Ari stopped and turned. Saddam Hussein was running back across the bridge. Ari frowned. What was he up to? He took a pair of thin latex gloves out of his pocket and squeezed his hands inside of them. Then he reached inside the driver's window and lifted Carrington's SIG Sauer off his lap. Good, no blood. He eased the detective's jacket away from the stout belly and slid the gun into its holster.

Hollow footsteps on the footbridge. Saddam Hussein had returned, a rifle in each hand.

"Look at these!" he exclaimed, looking like a mustachioed child as he held them up. "Beautiful! Stupid jackasses dropped them when they wet their pants. They're, uh..."

"Tac-50 sniper rifles, produced by McMillan Brothers Rifle Company. Bolt action, .50 caliber."

"Think they're worth a lot?"

"I would imagine," said Ari. "So you didn't have any trouble?"

"Got the drop on them. They were up on that ridge. They turned around and there was Saddam Hussein standing right behind them."

"I'd probably wet my pants, too," said Ari, walking around to the other side of the Lexus.

"The .38 helped," Saddam admitted. "By the way, they looked like someone had roughed them up not too long ago. That your doing?"

"Go get the van. Pull up to the foot of the bridge over there."

"Yes, sir!"

Ari leaned down and pulled away the strips of duct tape dangling from the car frame just under the passenger door. Mahmoud had done almost too good a job. Ari had had a difficult moment loosening the tape off the gun. If they bothered to look, the forensics people would find traces of adhesive. And Ari doubted he would be able to cover any tracks he left behind sufficiently enough to disguise the fact that a second party had been at the scene. But he did not think it would matter.

Still, he took the precaution of removing a handkerchief and wiping down every surface he had touched. He opened the trunk and removed the large canvas bag Mahmoud had placed inside. Little fellow was strong, Ari granted with a smile. Mahmoud would take after his father. Even if he grew up as the spitting image of Saddam Hussein, he would never be drafted as a lookalike decoy. Some things really had improved.

He was taking great care in placing the red-handled .38 in Carrington's left hand when an old Astrovan pulled up across the creek. He was lucky the detective had been a southpaw. Being right-handed would have presented complications.

When he was done, he gave the body one last cursory inspection. Then he performed a small salute and reached down to turn off the lights.

He crossed the footbridge, the canvas bag over his shoulder. Abu Jasim greeted him at the other end. He had removed the moustache and beret, but the resemblance to the imprisoned Iraqi leader was still uncanny.

"Where's Mahmoud?" Ari asked.

"Probably halfway to that boat landing where we first met. Want me to call him on his cell?"

"No. And I want you to leave me off there when you pick him up. My house is being watched. Better not let them see your van."

"Okay." Abu Jasim looked across the wide stream at the Lexus. "Think it was a good idea to kill an American cop?"

"It was necessary." Ari laid the bag down in the back of the van. "He was a threat to my family."

"Ah. You know best. But still..."

"As soon as they test the gun, the police will drop the investigation. It was used in a homicide. A whole family wiped out using the gun I shot him with and put in his hand. Remorse and suicide, clear and simple."

If they look close enough, they'll say he murdered his own daughter....

"What I'm saying, Colonel, is that those two clowns with the sniper guns...I don't think they planned on doing any shooting. When I came up on them, they were making jokes. They hadn't chambered their rounds."

"It had to be done. Rana and Karim..."

"Okay, Colonel," Abu Jasim said, and repeated, "You know best."

"It's too bad. He wasn't a bad man. I would have done the same thing as he did."

"Too bad," Abu Jasim shook his head. "But you know the old saying: It's better to have your enemy for lunch than for your enemy to have you for dinner."

"How is your English?"

"About as good as my French," said the former Saddam Hussein impersonator.

"At the end, he kept saying 'fuck me, fuck me'. You don't suppose..."

"Colonel, I always said you could charm the pants off anything."

"You did?"

"Well, maybe not *always*, sir." Abu Jasim cleared his throat. "So your librarian came through for you?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to reward her," Abu Jasim ventured suggestively.

"I'll take her to dinner." Ari opened the mouth of the canvas bag and began pulling out various items. Abu Jasim whistled lowly as he rested them on the van bed.

"These, plus the .38 I gave you...how much can you get for them? I'll give you a 20 per cent commission if you can dispose of these."

"The night goggles I don't know about. Probably not much. As for the guns...I'd never get across the Canadian border with an armory like that."

"You don't know anyone in the States?"

"There's a man in New York..."

"Try him."

"And the rifles?"

"A bonus for you. Now, for this..." Ari zipped open the two pouches of cocaine, the one from the Jenn-Air stove and the one he had taken from the kayakers.

"Oh...Colonel. Pardon me, but now I see why they call you the Godless One."

"You can deal with this?"

"Probably with the same man. But--"

"Excellent. Send me 80 percent of whatever you make."

"Pretty risky..."

"Seventy-five per cent, then."

Abu Jasim looked longingly at the Lexus across the creek.

"No," said Ari. "That stays. It can't be helped."

NINETEEN

Over the next two weeks, Ari noted an efflorescence of orange in the stores. When he inquired about it, he was told by a bemused clerk that Halloween was fast approaching. He looked Halloween up on the net and learned it was an American conflation of Celtic and Christian holidays. At first it seemed like a memorial for past Christian saints, which seemed rather dull. Then it looked to be a kind of memorial for the dead, which seemed appropriate. Third glance suggested a worship of evil, which Ari found intriguing, although he fretted over the tidbit that cats were sometimes abused during the event. He occasionally saw Sphinx, but the cat had snubbed him ever since Ari had evicted him from his hiding place under the stove.

"Be careful, little beast," Ari would murmur, thankful that Sphinx was not black-- black cats being the main targets of sadistic mayhem.

He finally concluded that Halloween was just a fun time for kids, and he was delighted at the prospect of little tots showing up at his door and yelling, "Trick or Treat!"

He bought some decorations and a pumpkin. He carved a suitably scary face into the pumpkin, then studied the gooey mess of pulp and seeds that he had excavated from the shell. He reviewed several recipes for pumpkin pie, then threw the mess into the garbage.

On the last day of October, Ari dragged a kitchen chair out to his front porch, lit a candle in his pumpkin head, and brought out a large basket of candy. He poured a small portion of whisky and hid it inside the door. The sun scaled away from the river and a

clear night approached. Ari lit a cigarette, took a sip of Jack Daniels, and relaxed, filled with mellow anticipation.

Five o'clock. Five-thirty. He heard groups of children up the hill, on Riverside Drive. They would arrive within minutes. He re-hid his drink and stubbed out his Winston.

The voices faded.

More voices approached, more voices faded. He went down the sidewalk to the road. A group was just leaving Howie Nottoway's driveway. A tiny angel turned and began to trot towards the river before her mother caught her and drove her back up the lane.

Of course. This was the Riggins house. Children had been brutally murdered here. It was only normal that parents and older children would want to avoid it.

He slumped to the porch and dropped in his chair. As he lifted his glass, he caught sight of a yellow smudge at the edge of the yard.

"Beast," said Ari. "Spy. Traitor. Turncoat. Don't you look plump? Who's been feeding you? The same people who have been feeding me?"

Sphinx's tail shifted slightly. Ari knew there was no point in going after it. The cat would come in its own good time, if at all.

Ari stood nodding and smiling and nodding and frowning and shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders and in general following Howie Nottoway's rambling conversation with every physical gesture in his armory, save the non-neighborly ones. Ari had joined the Neighborhood Watch, and was already responsible for nabbing a

young boy who enjoyed defacing lawn ornaments and an infamous dog that took some kind of canine pleasure over leaving its stools on innocent doorsteps. Howie was ecstatic over the new member's aggressive tactics, though they were counterbalanced by a grievous laxity when it came to the loud parties on the other side of the woods.

"Howie, why don't you join us one evening? I'm sure the Mackenzies would be glad to have you."

"You mean...you've been going..."

"I enjoy the good fellowship, the bonhomie. And I find Tracy Mackenzie irresistible. Stupid, but irresistible."

Howie laughed in spite of himself.

"Bring the wife," Ari continued. "And if you can't make it...be patient. I know they get loud, and they smoke, and they can be quite obnoxious at times. But it's only once a week, and they usually pass out before midnight."

"Well...you really think they'd like having us?"

Matt and Tracy Mackenzie would probably suffer seizures if they saw Howie walking up to their door with a bottle of champagne in one arm and a bushel of good will in the other, but Ari was convinced a bit of diplomatic tact would settle the issue.

They had only once discussed Carrington's suicide. Ari had watched carefully as Howie progressed from startled amazement to confusion. There was no trace of sorrow. If anything, there had been a hint of relief.

No more being bullied by the Detective Sergeant into spying on his neighbor and breaking into his house. No more sickening exposures of his inadequacy, or of the frailties of law and order. His sphincter might be on a short leash--it always would be--

but he could ease the rest of his persona into public life without fear or sarcasm. And without recriminations. Ari would not be asking him for the key to his back door.

Yes, he would be on patrol tomorrow night. Yes, he would be sure his cell phone was fully charged. No, he was not yet ready to attend Howie's church. But who knew what the future held?

Lynn the Librarian became Lynn the friend, but nothing more. Lynn tried to interest Ari in *The Tale of the Genji*. Ari wanted her to accompany him to a bowling alley, which he was reluctant to visit alone. They compromised by going to see *Gigli* at the Westhampton. They enjoyed the popcorn.

She tried to learn more about him. He found her sweet and attractive, in a flat-footed way.

"Whatever happened with your friend? What is his name, by the way? He didn't give it to me on the phone. Did your joke work?"

"He was a little nonplussed at first, but in the end he died laughing," Ari answered.

"That's amazing."

"What, that he died laughing?"

"That I've met someone who uses 'nonplussed' as part of his everyday speech."

Fred, of Ted's Custom Lawn Care & Landscape Design Service, seemed to know whenever he was out of the house. The LoJack, of course. After the first visit, Ari did not see him again for a long time. He would arrive home to find his yard immaculate and

a thumb drive on his kitchen table or already plugged into his computer. He wondered at this furtive technique. Why not just hand it to him in person? Was it pride in tradecraft? To show Ari this was serious business, and to impress upon him the need for caution? Or was it possible Fred could not trust himself to stay cool in front of his client after what Ari had done to Sandra?

The pictures became a steady drain on Ari's soul. After an hour of looking at them he would pour a drink and continue working until he passed out. Eventually, he began pouring that first drink before he even opened the image viewer. The faces of terror became a single face, two eyes peering out of a kuffiah scarf with malevolent righteousness while standing over his victim or victims.

In the occasional digital video (usually ripped off from Al Jazeera) the executors-murderers could be heard chanting the usual Koranic-Marxist inanities (certainly a weird combination) to justify their actions. There was usually a trace of hysteria in their voices as they struggled to make clear that they were not common killers, but warriors of a mighty cause. It was ever thus with young men struggling to make a name for themselves, whether before society or before God.

Often on the street Ari saw young black men with their hoods turned up, even in warm weather. They were flaunting their dangerous anonymity. They were learning. The Crusaders had brought back etiquette and refined taste from their wars. The Americans returned home with something far more sinister, and they feared it.

The men he fingered sometimes showed up on the news as part of the daily body count. Ari had no way of telling if this was due to his efforts or to the diligence of the Coalition and Iraqi authorities. But one day he received an email that merely said:

'Thanks'. The sender's address ended with 'dot gov'.

The Great Satan appreciated his efforts.

He bought a portable television with a combination VCR/DVD player. He checked out movies and documentaries from the library and watched lectures from the Great Teachers series. Greek Mythology, Mediterranean Civilizations, the Great Philosophers, Economics, the American Civil War. He also liked old Hollywood films, and enjoyed Great Expectations so much that he checked out the book and read it through in two sittings. He took out the Day the Earth Stood Still. The robot's first appearance sent a deathly chill through Ari. There it was...the hidden face, the fierce, destructive eye: al Qaeda in metal.

On December 23, Ari pulled one of the kitchen chairs into the living room and sat where Jerry Riggins had sat one year earlier. He sipped at his Jack Daniels, staring out the picture window long after midnight.

Christmas came and went. He exchanged small gifts with Lynn at the library reference desk. Lynn gave him a wary smile. She told him he did not look well.

The knock came on December 30. Ari was on his mattress, having fallen asleep in the mid-afternoon after a particularly hard session on the computer in which he had not only identified a killer, but the decapitated head of a victim. The insurgency was feeding on itself. The Americans would probably find this a hopeful sign.

Before logging off, he had checked out a news site. He spent an hour reading,

watching streaming videos, and drinking before falling onto his mattress.

He opened his eyes, then closed them, trying to ignore the visitor. But the knocking became louder, more insistent. Whoever it was would not give up.

Rolling to his side, he knocked over the glass sitting on the floor next to the mattress. There wasn't much whiskey left in the glass, but spilling even a drop was a sin. He swore in Greek and Farsi.

Struggling to his feet, Ari pounded downstairs and threw open the door.

"What!" he demanded.

The man and woman on his stoup were taken aback as much by his appearance as by the violence of his greeting.

It was an unseasonably warm day. The man and woman wore light jackets. She had dark hair and round, thick glasses. He wore dark sunglasses against a sun that was going down.

"Good evening, sir," said the girl. "We were wondering if you had heard the Good News."

She held up a Bible.

"Good evening Fred," said Ari. "Good evening, Deputy Karen Sylvester."

The girl lowered the Bible. "Shit," she said. "Okay, invite us in, and try to look normal about it. Look like you're a lost soul or something."

"Howie Nottoway can't see my front door from his property."

"There could be someone in the woods. There could be someone watching from the river, from one of those islands. There could be a fucking satellite focused on us. Will you invite us in before I bang you with this?" Sandra/Karen held up the Bible again.

Ari stood aside and they entered.

"You look like shit," said Karen after he closed the door. Then she peered at him closely. "Have you been crying? *You?*"

"Forgive my appearance. I wasn't expecting company."

"You mean you always look like this when nobody's around? I don't believe it."

"You are wise not to." He nodded at Fred. "It's not the season for yard work, is it?"

"I'm not allowed to see you without backup, anymore," said Karen.

"Ah, Fred is your bodyguard."

Fred grinned sheepishly and cracked his knuckles. "I prefer it to trimming hedges."

Karen removed her wig and glasses. "I hate going in disguise. And we had to make it look legit. Went to a half dozen houses like this. They all slammed their doors in our face. That was great."

"Until we reached your neighbor," Fred glowered.

"That idiot Nottoway invited us in for punch," Karen fumed. "He wouldn't shut up. Jesus this and Jesus that. I had to promise to go to his church before he'd let us go."

"I didn't realize the Methodists were so...evangelical." Ari gave her a drunken, angelic smile.

"What's your problem?" Karen glanced about the bare living and dining rooms. "You haven't gotten any furniture yet? Where can I put this?" She waved her wig and glasses. He led her into the kitchen and pointed at the table. "This is still all you've got?"

"As you see."

She glanced at the dirty sink, then went down the hall and poked her head in the bathroom.

"Well at least you keep your kitty litter box clean," said Karen, coming back into the kitchen.

"I only have two chairs," said Ari.

"That's all right," said Fred, leaning against the counter.

"You've been crying," said Karen. "It's obvious."

Ari did not answer.

"Didn't you see the news this morning, Karen?" said Fred, practicing a sneer.

"They executed his fearless leader in Baghdad. There's a big stink. Someone secretly filmed the hanging. Caught Saddam yelling, the executioners cursing at him...really fun stuff. Our government wants to know how the Iraqis could put something like that on the air."

Karen looked at Ari with near horror. "You were crying over that son of a bitch?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Ari in a tight voice.

"I would hope not."

"I was thirteen when he became president, but he was the leader long before that, and everyone knew it. When I was a child, one day..." Ari looked down.

"You look like shit, but I didn't realize you were thinking shit, too." Pulling a gun out from under her jacket, Karen sat at the table, across from Ari. "You want to wait outside, Fred? I have some personal things I want to discuss with Ari here. I can take care of myself."

Fred looked doubtful.

"Go on," Karen persisted.

"All right, but I'm keeping the front door open."

"If you think you need to."

Karen heard the front door open, waited a moment, then leaned forward. "How the hell do you know my name?"

"An old high school classmate of yours told me."

"Who?"

"Moria Riggins."

Karen briefly thought he was making a sick joke, then a sickness of awareness caused her face to sag. "You've seen a yearbook."

"In one of your local libraries."

"I didn't even know they carried them," said Karen.

"And Tina Press was also part of the cheerleading squad."

"Yes."

"She said nothing about knowing you, and she told me she had met Moria in a shopping mall. There was no reason why she would do this, unless she knew you. She understood that if I became curious enough I might track down one of those yearbooks and see all three of you together."

"You really believe she can think that far ahead?"

"So you have kept in touch over the years and know her current situation."

Karen bit her lip at being so easily snared. She had not been prepared for this, but for something completely different. The gun said it all. She was here about Carrington.

Ari took out a cigarette.

"Would you mind not smoking?" said Karen.

"It would be considered extremely impolite in my country for you to ask me not to smoke in my own home."

"This isn't your country."

"This isn't your home." Ari lit up.

"Okay, listen, there's been some question--" Karen sneezed. Ari watched as she fussed with a Kleenex.

"Some question...?"

"About Carrington."

"You mean the detective who killed the Riggins family?" Ari blew a cloud.

"That's what the newspapers say. The ballistics tests--"

"Yeah, I know. But we've heard rumors coming out of the RPD. Unofficial things."

"I don't see how there can be any questions. He felt deep remorse over what he had done and he killed himself."

"There weren't any traces of gunpowder on his hand," said Karen.

"Ah..." Ari shook his head. "Are the tests for these traces always accurate?"

"Usually. And not only that. The ground around the car was messed up when the rescue crew arrived. But it looks like there was a van of some sort parked nearby that same night."

"How near?"

"On the other side of a footbridge, about forty yards away."

"And someone saw this van?"

"It left tire marks."

"Interesting. So you think it wasn't suicide?"

"Where were you that night?"

"Here, I believe."

"Do you have anybody who can corroborate that?"

"Certainly. Jack."

"Jack who?"

"Daniels."

"I'm not talking about your current company."

Ari nodded his head in confession.

"So?"

"Karen...Miss Sandra...I know Detective Sergeant Carrington committed suicide because I'm the one who drove him to it."

The deputy's eyes narrowed. "How did you do that?"

"I presented him with the evidence. He was a murderer. True, he only murdered one person, but about that there is no doubt."

"You sound even more pompous when you're drunk." Karen sneezed again. "Do you really have to smoke that shit around me?"

"You're free to leave."

"No..." Karen wiped her nose. "Go ahead and prove to me what an asshole you are. You already tried to strangle me. What's a little suffocation after that?"

Ari stubbed out his cigarette. "I deeply apologize for what happened--"

"When was the last time you saw Carrington?"

"Two days before he killed himself. In this house. He sat in that chair."

"And you showed him your 'evidence'."

"I convinced him that members in his own department probably knew the truth, that they were suspicious from the beginning because his investigation was so deeply flawed, and that one day he would be confronted about it by his peers."

"That's not what we're hearing."

"What you're hearing is idle speculation. The people who know the truth have no need to spread rumors. 'Justice has been served' is the curious phrase you have here. I'm satisfied that the van treads that the police found are unimportant. They could have been left there at any time."

Ari felt dizzy. He got up and went over the sink.

"Are you going to puke?"

"One moment..." He leaned over the basin until the nausea passed. "I think I'll make some tea. Would you like some?"

"What did you say to him?" Karen demanded.

Ari filled his new kettle with tapwater and placed it on the burner.

"Did Tina mention to you that Tom Massington had become convinced that he wasn't Moria's father?"

"I don't know what you're--" Karen stopped herself. She took a deep breath.

"Did you put enough water in there for two cups? I think I'll have one, too. And yes, Tina mentioned it to me."

"Who do you think the real father is?" Ari added some water to the kettle.

"What? You're saying it was Carrington?"

"Tina met Tom and Heather Massington many years ago. Did you..."

"I was with Tina that day. Moria had invited us over."

"And did you ever meet Carrington?"

"No," Karen said.

"Look in the newspaper archives for a picture of Jerry and Moria accepting an award from the detective. You'll be impressed by the resemblance between father and daughter."

"Are you implying he murdered his daughter?"

Ari took a deep breath. He was going to lay out a tale that squeezed probability at both ends. But it had to be elaborate enough to keep Karen guessing.

"I believe Heather told him the baby was his. For years, he followed Moria's childhood progress from a distance. Perhaps Heather gave him annual updates, like the investment reports sent out to shareholders. He was the one who came to the Massington house to tell the family about the death of the son in a car accident.

"When Moria grew up and left home, he could finally play the part of doting father. He may not have thought much of Jerry. No man likes to see his daughter marry an artist. But he learned to accept him. He included Jerry in his little plaque ceremonies and was his booster for other considerations. I'm sure Detective Carrington could be very persuasive in front of an award committee. Even more persuasive when he got committee members alone in a stairwell."

"He was persuasive enough to take over the case from a lieutenant," Karen said grimly.

"Ah."

The kettle began to whistle. One of two cups Ari had prepared was new, bought with the possibility of a visit from Lynn in mind. But he had not yet invited her to Beach Court. While the tea steeped, he brought out a box of sugar cubes and set it on the table.

"Unfortunately, Detective Carrington had no sense of proportion. Although he had three legitimate children of his own, his affection centered on Moria. This did not present a problem while Jerry and Moria lived in the countryside. It was only when they moved back to the city that Carrington's visits became excessive."

"You don't think Moria and him..." Karen looked down at the tea Ari placed before her.

"In my country, cousins frequently marry. This results in some intense feuding within the family and between families. I'm convinced that's part of the reason for Saddam's downfall. But that's another, and much longer, story."

"With a tragic ending, according to you." Karen's mockery wilted under Ari's harsh glance. "All right, so you don't think Moria's father was bopping her."

"Not her biological father."

Karen's head shot up. "Tom Massington?"

"Mr. Massington's reaction when he found out about Moria's true parentage was extreme. It had happened over two decades ago. If he felt inclined to punish anyone, it should have been his wife, not the innocent daughter. He behaved more like a jilted lover."

"But there was Jerry."

"Whom Moria herself referred to as a 'dickless wonder'. I realize this can be interpreted as a metaphor for a general inadequacy. But it can also be seen--"

"Haven't you heard?" Karen interrupted. "Impotence doesn't exist in this country anymore. We're the Viagra nation."

"I wasn't speaking of impotence." Ari took a sip of tea. He scowled. "I want something stronger."

Karen holstered her Glock, grabbed the box of sugar, and dropped several cubes in Ari's cup. "Try a little more of this, instead. I don't want you passing out on me."

Ari nodded reluctantly and stirred his tea until the cubes dissolved.

"You think Jerry was gay?" she said after Ari had taken a sip.

"When I visited the gallery, there were two men there who were very...affectionate. I overheard one of them speak of Jerry as his 'darling'."

"A figure of speech?" Karen suggested.

"I don't think so. Look at those smudges Jerry was always painting. I believe they represented something."

"Well, I've seen my brothers' dirty underpants..."

"Exactly."

"Wait, I just meant that a lot of modern art looks like someone took a dump on canvas."

"I think those paintings symbolize the filthy male anus."

Karen smiled, burped, sneezed. She looked away for a moment, shaking her head and trying to fight down her grin. Then she looked up.

"Why don't we just agree that neither of us is an art critic and leave it at that?"

"If you wish."

Karen's grin slowly disappeared. "You're saying Joshua and William weren't

Jerry's? Then who...?"

"Tom Massington's. He knew Jerry was an artistic hack. He also knew he was gay--the perfect match for his daughter and mistress. Or rather, the woman he thought was his daughter."

"Do you realize how twisted this sounds?"

"Do you think so?" Ari reached for his pack of cigarettes, then stopped. "Mr. Massington, the Tin Man. It is possible that Moria broke from him temporarily. She lived with Jerry in the countryside for awhile. But thirty miles isn't all that far. And when Tom Massington bought a house on the river and invited them to move back to the city, Jerry leapt at it."

"I thought it was..."

"You thought it was Moria's decision to come back. That was what she told you and Tina. But Jerry thought Carrington was the father of Joshua and William." Ari stopped. Karen was staring at him. "What's wrong?"

"I'm suddenly not buying into any of this," she said, trying to meet his eyes. "This is shaping up to be the kind of story that hides a thousand sins. *Your* sins."

"Hear me out before you make any final conclusions." Ari took out a cigarette and lit up. "Or you may leave."

"I'm listening," Karen sneezed.

"Carrington was delighted with the move. He was now closer to his beloved daughter, Iraq."

"What?"

Ari glanced up.

"You said he was now closer to his beloved daughter, Iraq."

"I did? I mean Moria, of course." He directed a bemused smile at himself, then continued: "By your standards, Detective Carrington was corrupt. He had known about the drug trade in this neighborhood, and had probably made an occasional token arrest. But when he found out his daughter was involved, he stifled all investigation. And the irony is that she probably became involved because of him."

"Imagine. She was already under immense stress because of Tom Massington and the reality of her children by him. Her close friend Tina was a steady user, presenting a constant temptation. And she was familiar with cocaine from her high school days. 'Recreational use' I believe the term is, to remove the taint of sin."

Karen was staring at her tea. Ari went on:

"One day, Carrington brings her before a mirror and stands next to her. 'Moria, who do you think you resemble?' And then he tells her."

"Are you familiar with the Kayak Express?"

Karen shook her head.

"It has been operating in this area for quite some time. Moria probably learned about it from the Mackenzies, her neighbors. She began buying from the kayakers. I suppose the drug helped her deal with her troubles."

"I'm sure Carrington was unhappy when he found out about it. He probably lectured her mercilessly, but at the same time he took steps to protect her. And that meant protecting the Express from police interference. The kayakers became quite brazen, even firing off rockets in the middle of the river to announce their arrival."

"Jerry turned a blind eye to all of this, at first. Being the good artist that he was--"

or rather, being of an artistic temperament--he no doubt participated to some degree. And he believed they were safe under the protective mantle of his wife's lover, which he assumed Carrington was. But as the boys grew older he became concerned. He was actually quite a good father. One of the boys had seen them indulging, or asked him what was in the white packets, and Jerry realized he and his wife had crossed the line. It was time to return to the virtuous life. But then came the day of the comedy."

"Comedy?" Karen asked wanly.

"Of course I don't know how it happened. Possibly Jerry thought that since the boys were Carrington's, he would lend a hand in cleaning up Moria's life. And when he spoke the fatal phrase, 'After all, Joshua and William are yours,' the detective must have fallen out of his seat. 'I assumed they were yours!' he says. He had no idea Jerry was gay, or if he suspected, thought he swung both ways. After an eye-opening discussion, Carrington admits that he is Moria's father. Imagine that moment: both men staring at each other, wondering how the world could turn so sour on them. They storm up to Moria and browbeat her into telling them who the real father is."

"And you're saying things got a lot more sour?"

"That was to be expected. It dawns on Jerry how Tom Massington has used him. And poor Detective Sergeant Carrington can only think of getting his hands around Massington's throat. After all, the Tin Man had not only committed incest with his half-daughter, he had done it fully in the belief that she was entirely his. The Massington's were probably on holiday in Italy. That's the only explanation why Carrington didn't kill Tom that day or week. By the time they got back, both men had had time to work out their only option: keeping Massington away from Moria, or at least out of her bed."

"At this point, Moria had broken. I would imagine she was saying 'to hell with men'. That included her boys, who might inherit the tendencies of the father. When Jerry confronted Massington, he reacted like a man insulted, cut off Moria's allowance, and removed her from his will. Heather was guilt-stricken, knowing as she must have what had gone on under her roof. Jerry had no doubt also told his father-in-law that Carrington was Moria's real father, and Massington used this as a weapon against his wife. She refused to disown her daughter, but I doubt there was any great affection between them.

"Emotionally, Moria felt the only thing left to her were drugs and her old school chums. Eventually, she became a dealer as well as a user. For awhile, Jerry went along with this. His last conversation with Massington had taught him a lesson. Some things were better swept under the rug. Even Carrington pulled back, doing what he could to prevent scandal for his daughter and nephews. After all, he was now happily married, with three children of his own. He had to be discreet.

"Jerry performed within his own severe limitations. His paintings were going nowhere. Almost the only income from Moria's Notions came from laundered drug money. For a year or so he acquiesced. But then, one evening, he saw Joshua with one of the baggies of cocaine. He took it away from him, not knowing there was another stashed away in the boy's bedroom.

"He knew the Kayak Express was due to make an appearance that night, and he was determined Moria should not meet it. He had not only found out about the gun Moria bought from the kayakers, he discovered where--"

Ari found himself pouring a drink. He did not remember standing or going to the counter. There were already four ounces of whiskey in his eight-ounce glass. He felt

Karen's eyes on him, shrugged, and came back to the table with the glass.

"How am I suppose to believe anything I hear when you've been drinking like this?" she said as Ari took a sip. "I don't think I've ever heard of a soused Arab before."

"Assyrian. Of noble blood."

"Asshole, with rubbing alcohol in his veins."

"Jerry took the gun from its hiding spot and chased away the kayakers--"

"You're talking about the night of the murders?"

"Of course."

"Then you forgot about the door."

"The door?"

"The bashed-in back door."

"Oh. They had a fight. Moria locked out Jerry because he had taken the gun. He stole Howie Nottoway's sledgehammer and broke back in."

"And that happened..."

"Around 5:30."

"Leaving six hours unaccounted for."

"Moria swept up the kitchen. Or perhaps Jerry did. And while Jerry went upstairs to console the boys, who were terrified, Moria called you."

Karen said nothing.

"A woman in that situation needs to talk to someone reliable. The men in her life were worthless, including Carrington, who allowed the Kayak Express to operate even while he knew it was destroying his daughter. Tina Press was unreliable. Heather Massington had allowed her husband to abuse her for years. Which left you, her old

cheerleader friend, now a Deputy U.S. Marshal."

"I..."

"Of course, you offered soothing words. You were probably even ready to come out to Beach Court. But then Moria told you that Carrington was her father. You were...how does that song go? 'Confused, perplexed, bewildered'? Because you were his lover, and this news hit you like a thunderbolt."

"Now wait--"

"You have a better idea of what happened in those six hours than I do. I could have used that information, incidentally, but it's of no consequence now. Things seemed to calm down. But soon after eleven that night--I believe the Express was running early that night--they heard the rockets over the island. Moria was supposed to tell them to go away and never come back. Jerry did not trust her and came out with a gun to emphasize the point. Moria packed him back to the house and told the kayakers to come back a little later.

"Moria pretended to go to bed. Jerry, wanting to make sure the Express was gone for good, turned the easy chair around in the living room and watched the river.

"Moria was sitting up in bed when she heard a sound from Joshua's bedroom. She went in and found him holding William against his chest. They had both taken cocaine. She was horrified by what Jerry's reaction would be. She did what she could to slow William's heart rate, bringing in a damp cloth and her prescription of Valium. To no avail. William died in Joshua's arms.

"Moria slipped quietly downstairs. Perhaps she was going to tell Jerry. Perhaps she was going to run away. She discovered that he had dozed off. Fearful that he would

shoot her once he had found out what had happened to William, she slipped the gun out of his hand and shot him. A case might be made for self-defense....

"But as she reasoned over what she had done, what had happened, what a shambles her life had become, she decided to end everything then and there. She went upstairs, carried William into his room, then returned and shot Joshua. A mother's love.

"She sat on her bed, watching the river out the window. She fully intended to kill herself. But she was afraid.

"An anonymous call had gone into Crimestoppers about a disturbance here. Crimestoppers notified the police and Carrington picked up on the call."

Ari was talking fast, sensing he would soon be unable to articulate a coherent thought, let alone a long string of them. Which did not prevent him from pouring more whiskey.

"When he arrived, he found a slaughterhouse. And there, upstairs, was his daughter--responsible for it all. I believe she knew he was going to kill her. She understood he had a family of his own. If she went to trial and details came out about Carrington's involvement with the Express, let alone his extramarital affair with you--Moria knew about that, didn't she?--his life would be destroyed. And having just murdered her son, she understood that peculiar form of paternal love. I wonder what they said to each other? He probably told her how much he loved her just before he took up her gun and pulled the trigger. That was the shot the kayakers heard when they returned. They didn't hear the second shot, when Carrington fired a round into William's head, because they had fled." Ari thought for a moment. "As an experienced policeman, Carrington would have known he could not hide William's cause of death. The

toxicology report would show the drug in the boy's system. Perhaps it was an emotional reaction, as though he was accepting part of the blame.

"He ran downstairs. He was going to throw the gun into the river. But then he saw the lights from a patrol car in the road. Officers Mangioni and Jackson had arrived. Desperately, he sought out a hiding place, and chose the central air duct, where the gun could remain hidden for years, if not forever. But the two policeman saw him at the air vent.

"I have no idea how Carrington made them keep their silence. They probably had connections to the Express, too, and he threatened to take them down with him if they spoke up.

"Thus the crime was covered up. There were a few other conspirators involved. Carrington, a very persuasive man, managed to have the coroner's report filed away without comment. Drug abuse and suicide within one of the city's favorite families did not sit well with anyone, although the news people would have relished a story like that. The only person with serious doubts was you.

"You knew Carrington's investigation was badly flawed. Why? You're a stickler for detail, Miss Sandra, and Moria was your friend. But you have more faith in the truth. I believe that's why you wanted to join the Army. Nothing is more 'true' than combat. Or so it's said. You suspected your lover was covering up the truth out of a mistaken sense of propriety. When I dropped into your lap, you decided to egg him on. Thus, went your thinking, you had two investigators for the price of one. A dubious Iraqi cop and your own beloved. You even went to the trouble to tell him of my presence. When your LoJack alerted you that I was in Shockhoe Bottom, you took the chance that I was going

to the Firefox Gallery to see Jerry's paintings. You called Carrington and told him where you were going, and that there would be a certain person of interest there. What you didn't know was that he used that opportunity to call Howie Nottoway and have him search the Riggins house again for the drug cache he knew was hidden there. The 'mother' of the Kayak Express had told him about it. Moria had taken a huge amount on credit, with the promise that she would re-sell at a large profit. 'Mother' was eager to get that product back, and was threatening Carrington with exposure if he didn't find it for her. Poor Howie was terrified of the detective and did as he was told. Carrington had given him the key to the back door.

“Incidentally, while Howie was inside of my house, the one individual who knows the entire truth from beginning to end sneaked in. I finally managed to have a talk with him.”

Karen finally lifted her head, but Ari waved off her curiosity.

"In the meantime, I was meeting you and Carrington in the gallery. Later, I wondered about the coincidence. But it was no coincidence. Carrington had succumbed to your bait, and showed up soon after you arrived.

"There were other hints about your grand design. Leaving the memory disk in that pouch for me to find was particularly egregious. Is that the right word? But even you were struck by the pictures of the battered door. The first ones showed a floor that had been free of debris. It was highly unlikely the killer had swept up after himself, so it might be thought the police had cleared a path. But the last pictures showed a floor covered with broken wood, as though someone had gone into the garbage and thrown it all back down. You thought this might be a bit too compromising, or confusing, so you

tried to delete them from the disk. Instead, you accidentally made copies.”

“Why would...”

“Carrington had to put the mess back to support the theory that it was an outsider who had killed the Riggins family very soon after breaking inside. He couldn’t leave evidence that some time had passed between the break-in and the murders. Enough time to have allowed a kind of peace to come over the house, giving someone the opportunity to perform a spot of housekeeping.

"I don't think you believed Carrington was involved in anything more than a misguided cover-up, but when I told him all of this, he assumed you knew the truth, and that his mistress had betrayed him. He had, of course, access to the phone records that showed Moria’s call to you. It was the last straw for him."

Karen jolted up. "You lousy fuck."

"Don't you want to know where the murder weapon is? Or the cocaine?"

"You lousy fuck."

"But I did what you put me here to do."

"You think I wanted you to drive him to suicide?"

"I didn't think it would come to that," Ari said, looking abashed. "I thought he was made of sterner stuff."

"He was. That's why he killed himself, to save his family...and me."

Ari lowered his head.

Karen reached into her pocket and pulled out a USB flash drive. "Here. I was told to deliver this. I don't know what's on it, but I can guess. Just a little reminder of the old country, and how sick you people really are."

She tossed it on the table. Ari stared at it.

"All that you've just told me is cockamamie bullshit," Karen continued, picking up her wig and fake glasses. "Not one word is true. You got that?"

Ari nodded contritely.

Karen drew away to the kitchen entrance. She looked back. "You lousy fuck." Then she was gone.

Fred was still at the open front door, waiting to lend assistance, if needed.

"We're leaving," Karen said curtly before slamming the front door shut. Ari rose and walked unsteadily to the window over the kitchen sink. Leaning forward, he could just make out Karen pounding up Beach Court Lane before she disappeared beyond the trees separating his property from Howie Nottoway's. Her wig was askew. Fred was struggling to keep up.

Ari sniffed disparagingly at the flash drive and staggered upstairs to the bathroom. He peed, then leaned over the sink, trying to determine if he was going to throw up. He raised his head to the mirror.

"Cockamamie. Cock-a-mamie." He grinned. Working his way to the studio, he collapsed onto his mattress and turned over on his side.

Done. All done. Deputy Sylvester aka Miss Sandra had been worried that Ari Ciminon aka Abu Karim Ghaith Ibrahim would turn up dirt about her old friend Moria Riggins nee Massington. His allegations could top off a landfill. How much of it was true? Enough to serve his purpose.

He began picking away at his own reasoning to see how well it held up. Grain by grain, until it formed a mound, then a beach, then an island.

It was Pig Island. The sluggish Tigris flowed past, weary with the centuries. Ghaith's mother had gone shopping with his aunt at Al-Mansour. *Baba* and Ghaith's uncle used the opportunity to rent a boat and go out on the river. They brought along snacks of pistachio nuts and pomegranate seeds, as well as some liquid refreshment.

There was a strange, limpid ache in the air. The sky was too beautiful to be true. *Baba* landed the boat on the island and took up a spot with his brother on the sand. Meanwhile, Ghaith and his cousin, Hussam, stared daggers. They each had it in for the other, although neither could remember the original source of their enmity. They disappeared in the crowd and came to a spit. And then, spontaneously, they were at each others' throats, rolling in the sand, kicking and swearing.

They did not hear the powerboat coming up, or the shouts. Nor, in their ferocious struggle, did they notice the sudden, awed hush.

They did, however, hear the laughter. A broad, rich laugh that called attention to itself and caused them to stop and look up. And then they, too, fell into stupefied silence.

"Mr. Deputy!" Ghaith's father and uncle ran up, deeply mortified. They pulled the boys further apart, although they had already stopped fighting. "Mr. Deputy...I deeply regret--"

Saddam Hussein waved away *Baba's* contrition. "Boys fight. It's natural. They'll make good soldiers." Mr. Deputy (they all knew he would be president one day) glanced over at the blanket *Baba* and his brother had thrown down on the sand. "What's that you're drinking?"

"Uh..."

"Is that Jack Daniels?" Hussein snapped his fingers and two of his bodyguards

ran back to the boat. While they waited for them to return, Hussein strode over and tousled the boys' hair. "You both looked like fighting tigers as I came up. You don't often see boys tear into each other like that."

Ghaith raised his eyes and ventured an embarrassed grin. Saddam Hussein grinned back at him, his bright teeth matching the sun glinting off the palace across the river.

Everyone has their one great beatific moment in life, and this was Ghaith's. The man before him was a living monument, something to be worshipped and adored.

The bodyguards came back with a crate of Jack Daniels. They placed it between *Baba* and his brother.

"This should last you awhile," said Hussein.

Everyone was amazed. Ghaith's father did not know what to say. "Mr. Deputy..."

"Please, don't mention it. A little token to show my appreciation to my people."

He spread his arms, as though encompassing everyone on the island. "I love my people!"

Love. There was nothing surer.

Ghaith would never forget that moment. It was burned into him as powerfully as first love. Through the years to come, as the truth of the man became known, that love remained, a painful reminder of what could have been. Good and evil had become inextricably mixed. Saddam Hussein, mass murderer, torturer, war criminal. Yet that moment remained, a strange cold warmth that refused to go away, that suffused his mind, his chest, his legs...his knees?

Ari opened his eyes. Something warm had inserted itself behind his bent knees.

The cat had slipped into the house while Fred stood guard at the open door.

"Ah...Sphinx," Ghaith said drowsily. "You're the only one who knows the truth.
And you'll never tell."

Sequels in The 56th Man Series are available at Amazon:

2. [The Godless One](#)
3. [Cold Snap](#)
4. [The Gundog of Baghdad](#)
5. [The Shelter for Buttered Women](#)
6. [Backside](#)