

INTERCEPT

THOM TATE



COVERT WORLD : THE SHORT STORIES : MISSION 4

Chapter One

Vienna, Austria

01:19 (23:19 GMT)

July 18th

The night was comforting. It enveloped the room like a warm blanket and provided a veil of safety. The glow of the streetlamps reflected off the damp pavement and spilled into the room like a ribbon of light, illuminating Solomon's M89SR sniper rifle, resting on the makeshift table.

The rain had stopped more than an hour ago, but the sound of water dripping down the gutters outside the open window provided a soothing atmosphere. It was late; she was tired, and she's been waiting for close to twelve hours. She'd chosen a room on an empty floor of a multi-purpose building in the Griechengasse, a small shopping area catering in the most part to tourists. Below were apartments, small shops, and restaurants, the kind putting out spinning postcard holders on the sidewalk. They invited customers in with the sound of traditional Bavarian music and the smell of fresh pretzels.

The conditions weren't ideal, but she'd been in far worse. From her vantage point, she could make out the entire front of the Hotel Austria across the street. The location where her mark would arrive.

She spit out the last of her fingernail, a nervous bad habit she had no intention of breaking. To quell the butterflies and hunger she was experiencing, she moved over to the wooden crate she used as a table. With a sigh, she opened the Styrofoam container that had been there for hours. Rigor mortis had set in on the remnant of her sandwich. What had been hot had cooled and the cold fruit salad was room temperature. Her stomach growled, and Solomon devoured her leftovers.

Resting her fork on the makeshift table, she finished eating the last of the warm fruit, and cringed after washing it down with cold coffee. She shuddered.

Disgusting!

The sound of splashing water, forced out from beneath rolling tires, alerted her. She

grabbed her M89SR sniper rifle and chambered a round as she hurried over to the window. A black Mercedes sedan followed by two silver Range Rover SUVs came into view. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and an overwhelming feeling of confidence pushed away her nervousness. This was it. The wait was over.

Two blocks away and around the corner sat a white Citroën panel van, outfitted to resemble a Deutsche Telekom utility truck. They had decked it out with ladders and tools of the trade, laying orange cones on the road to further disguise its true intent as the three men waited for their spotter to return.

The side door to the van slid open and Marid Kanaan stepped inside—out of breath. Light reflected off his water-soaked orange vest, part of their uniform to look authentic. The driver wore a bright green vest, while Abir and Marid wore orange. Safar, the man in the passenger seat, wore yellow.

“They’re stopping now.”

Abir checked his watch. “How many?”

“I do not know, but there are three vehicles.”

Abir Mammeri was not a tall man, but what he lacked in stature, he replaced with his passion.

He backhanded Marid across the face. “You fool! How are we supposed to do this if we do not know what we’re up against?”

“I am sorry, Abir, I can go back and—”

“No! It is too late. Allah is on our side and he will ensure we are victorious.”

Abir was the nephew of Mohamed Alzahabi, the leader of the now-infamous Ansar al-Sharia extremist group. Mohamed took Abir in when he was three, after his father died.

In the early eighties, President Reagan had ordered any Libyan plane venturing beyond the “Line of Death”, an imaginary line extending twelve miles off the coast of Libya, to be shot down. Two F-14 Tomcats had shot Abir’s father, a Libyan fighter pilot, out of the sky when he had ventured beyond the line. As a result, Abir fell into the hands of his extremist uncle and his hatred for the West was born.

Abir said a brief prayer for the success of their mission and to protect the lives of his four-

man team. The men pulled black masks over their heads and chambered rounds into their weapons.

Abir tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Faadi, let's go."

Solomon peered through her rifle's scope and fixed it on her target.

Mohsen Fallahi's work on uranium enrichment in the higher echelons of Iran's nuclear program, was comparable to Robert Oppenheimer's in the 1940s, in terms of its audacity and scope.

In 2006, Fallahi had fallen off the grid and was presumed dead.

The re-emergence of Fallahi and the stall of diplomatic efforts to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions, had instigated Mossad to act. It was Solomon's task to eliminate the bastard before he could start.

With both eyes open, she kept a fix on the back of the Mercedes sedan, her right eye peering through her scope. Solomon placed her finger on the trigger.

Four men in black suits exited the closest Range Rover while the doors of the Mercedes remained closed. Three of the eight men approached the passenger side rear door. One was bald, and the other sported a long ponytail. They faced each other, making a path for Fallahi. The third one, sporting a long black beard, stood to the side, his head on a swivel. The fourth one wore a traditional Iranian black cap and walked into the hotel.

Solomon targeted the second SUV. Of the two she could see, they looked to be wearing more traditional clothes. The driver wore a black turban, while the rear passenger had on a colorful red vest. The two others were out of her view.

The driver's door of the Mercedes opened, and a massive man exited. He walked to the rear of the car and opened the trunk.

Dammit!

Solomon removed her finger from the trigger and stared out across the street. The trunk was now blocking her view, and a slight wave of panic washed over her, as she feared she wouldn't get a clean shot.

The hulk of a man removed a bag from the trunk and closed it. Solomon settled down, peered back through her scope, and placed her finger back on the trigger.

After an interminable wait, the rear passenger door opened, and Mohsen Fallahi stepped out of the car. Solomon put her crosshairs in the dead center of Fallahi's head. She took a deep breath, held it—

Machine gun fire shattered the quiet of the night, startling Solomon. The result was her shot went wide and far to the left, ripping through the black bearded one's chest.

Solomon gazed in disbelief as a lone Citroën van squealed to a stop in front of the hotel. The bald and pony-tailed bodyguards surrounded Fallahi, and pushed him inside the hotel to escape the mayhem. The hulk followed.

Two guards from the rear SUV exited. The one wearing a turban sent a five-round burst into the yellow vested terrorist's chest, four of the bullets hitting him in the torso and the fifth, his head, blowing out the back of his skull.

A shorter man, wearing orange, jumped out of the opposite side of the van and took cover at the rear. He risked a quick glance at his now-dead colleague.

“Faadi, they've taken him inside! Go get him!”

The green vested terrorist kneeled to avoid the hail of bullets heading his way.

Solomon kept observing, in shock.

The short man in orange appeared to be the leader, and another man wearing orange dropped to a prone position. They provided cover, peppering the Mercedes with bullets to allow the driver in green to cross the street.

Two other guards in the second SUV exited. The first one wore white traditional clothes with a black vest and the other wore a tan suit. One guy in a black vest motioned for the bald and pony-tailed guard to remain down, protected by the car.

The green vested terrorist reached the front of the Mercedes. He side-stepped onto the sidewalk and fired his AK-47. It shot the bald guard in the knee, sending him screaming to the ground. Bullets tore through the pony-tailed guard's neck.

An unmarked hotel staff exit door, to the left of the green vest, opened.

When the door opened, the massive bodyguard emerged.

The short one in charge screamed to get the green one's attention. “Look out! On your left!”

The bald guard raised his Colt ACP .45 pistol, and shot the green vest driver through the head. The bullet exited his skull and shattered the back passenger door window. Blood and gray matter splattered over the roof of the car, as Solomon continued to peer through her scope.

The guard with the cap had come out of the hotel. He and the tan suited one dragged the bald guy into the hotel for safety.

She scanned the area. Turban guard was crouched behind the rear of the first SUV. The one with the red vest and the other with the black vest had moved closer to the rear of the Mercedes.

Her eyes shifted to the rear of the van, where the leader inserted a fresh magazine into his weapon. He was speaking to the other orange vested terrorist.

As the two men conversed, the power of her scope allowed her to see the fear in the fourth man's eyes.

After exchanging a few words, the leader reached out and handed him something. She couldn't make out what he said, but whatever it was, there was a change in the man's demeanor—from fear to determination.

The man in orange stood and dashed across the street, around the front of the small motorcade. Two guards crouched behind the Mercedes for cover.

The terrorist leader stepped out from the rear of the van and fired toward the rear of the first SUV, shattering the rear windows. Turban guard ducked.

The would-be abductor in orange headed to the front of the Mercedes. Solomon's instincts told her the guards were expecting him, and they were.

As soon as he rounded the front of the car, both unleashed a fury of lead shredding the man's body. He fell into a lump of dead flesh on the sidewalk. A grenade rolled out of his hand.

The explosion shattered what glass remained and lifted the car into the air and onto its side. Shrapnel riddled both the vested guards' bodies. As the rainwater drained down the curb, it mingled with the blood to create a small but vivid crimson stream.

The terrorist leader stepped out from the van door providing his protection. Opening fire on the remaining guard outside, he screamed as he emptied the magazine, failing to kill him.

The turban wearing bodyguard, stepped away from the Range Rover, raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. It misfired. He reached into his jacket and retrieved his sidearm. He walked out onto the street toward the leader, who stood frozen, facing the approaching threat.

The terrorist leader frantically searched his vest as if looking for another magazine, but it was all for naught. The last remaining guard approached him, and with no warning, raised his pistol and aimed it at the terrorist's head.

The zip of a silent subsonic shot whizzed by his ear. Bone and brains erupted into a crimson halo.

Stunned, the lone terrorist leader spun around and peered toward Solomon. But she had hidden in the darkness of the empty room.

Keeping her eyes on him, Solomon placed her weapon on the table. She stayed in the dark's protection, but moved to get a better view out of the window.

The man she had saved jumped into the van and sped away. Beige suit and small capped guards came running out to the street, firing their weapons harmlessly in the van's direction, as it rounded the corner a block away.

The sound of sirens filled the air as Solomon studied the carnage now on the street, three levels down.

What in the hell happened?

Chapter Two

Benghazi, Libya

07:50 (05:50 GMT)

July 18th

Mohamed Alzahabi disconnected the call. The blood rushed to his head as his temples throbbed.

“Dammit!”

A violent sweep of his arm across the table, sent a pot of coffee, three small cups, and a .45 pistol crashing to the floor. Only the Koran remained. The sixty-four-year-old leader of Ansar al-Sharia was beside himself.

The Ansar al-Sharia, meaning “Partisans of Islamic Law,” was an Islamic militia group advocating implementing strict Sharia law across Libya. Following the destruction of the American Embassy and the death of its ambassador in Benghazi, a massive anti-militia rally had taken place, The Ansar al-Sharia agreed to disband. However, frustrated former leaders, realizing they still had devoted followers, brought the group back together and rebuilt it in silence, until they were strong enough to again, advance their cause.

The problem the group had was twofold: funding and manpower. Most of their funding had run out, and they were operating on sparse donations. With funding, they could get the recruits they needed: if they fixed the first issue, the second would take care of itself.

It was then Mohsen Fallahi came into the picture. The plan was to kidnap Fallahi and ransom him to the highest bidder: al-Qaeda, Hamas, or even the Iranians; they didn’t care. The money would be enough to fund their cause for months, if not years.

Events had forced them to abandon their former headquarters and occupy a run-down part of Benghazi, after the uprising against them. The three-story, mud-packed building was rotting from the roof down. Portions of the roof had collapsed and when it did rain, which wasn’t often, the water would trickle in through the top floor, and eventually find the second-story room where Alzahabi made his office. The room was dirty and sparse, save for a desk and three chairs.

The crash startled Zafar Kattan, Alzahabi's right-hand man, and he dashed into the room.

"Brother, what is it?"

"It is Abir! He has failed to retrieve Fallahi. They underestimated his protection, and all his men are dead. If he were not my nephew, I would kill him myself for such incompetence!"

"What are we going to do?"

"I will send more men. *You* are going to lead them."

"Me? But I don't have the—"

Alzahabi knelt and grasped the .45. Chambering a round as he stood. He pointed it at Zafar's face. "You will do as you are told! Do not make me tell you again or I will send you to Allah right now!"

Zafar raised his hands; his eyes wide with fear.

"Yes, yes, of course, brother. When would you like me to leave?"

"Now!" Alzahabi lowered his arm and flipped on the safety. The .45 landed with a thud on the desk when he tossed it.

"Take six men with you." He crouched under his desk, opened his safe, and withdrew a stack of passports and thirty thousand dollars cash. He thumbed through the passports and selected six for the men, plus one for Zafar.

"Go. *Bissalama.*"

#

Cruising at 45,000 feet over France at six hundred miles per hour, Special Agent Blake MacKay sat in the back of the Gulfstream 450 and relaxed while he flew back to Langley. He'd finished writing his brief on his mission in Croatia.

Blake put on his headphones, made a selection from his iPod and leaned back on the leather couch. Uncomfortable, he leaned forward and was reaching behind himself to adjust the pillow, when there was a "Breaking News" flash on the television. He removed his headphones, reached for the remote, and increased the volume. Fifteen seconds of information was all he needed to hear. He stood and walked to the front of the plane.

Blake opened the cockpit door. "We need to turn around. Now!"

The pilot glanced at his co-pilot, then back to Blake. "Okay, where we going?"

"Vienna."

Blake steadied himself as the plane made a sharp bank. As he balanced his way to the back of the plane, the onboard phone rang.

"MacKay."

"Blake. I don't suppose you were watching the news on your flight back?"

It was Blake's handler, Mike Brennan, Director of Clandestine Operations at the CIA.

"Yep. We turned around and we're headed to Vienna. I assume it's what you want me to do."

"Right."

Blake sat in the nearest seat and buckled his seatbelt. "So, what the hell is going on?"

"CIA sub-station in Vienna picked up some chatter early this morning between Abir Waled and Mohamed Alzahabi."

Blake grabbed his tactical pen from his pants and made notes. "Alzahabi controlled Ansar al-Sharia. We thought they had disbanded, didn't we?"

"Yeah, disbanded my ass. For a disbanded group, they made a real fucking mess in Vienna early this morning."

"Yeah, it was on the TV. What was their objective?"

"We think it was to kidnap Mohsen Fallahi, the former Iranian nuclear guru. Now, to do what with him, we can only assume. The group has been running on fumes since the Benghazi incident, so we're guessing it is to use him for ransom so they can replenish their coffers. They don't have the money or resources to use him to build a bomb."

"Okay, from what I saw, they were unsuccessful. So, what do you want me to do?"

As Mike continued, Blake opened his secure site on his laptop and clicked on a picture of Mohsen Fallahi.

“Well, here’s where it gets sticky, Blake. We’ve received intel confirming Mossad was involved, too.”

“Mossad? I can see them getting their hands dirty with this. To what capacity?”

“We don’t know, and the Israelis aren’t saying. You know how they are. Unless it benefits them to share information, they don’t say shit. I’m gonna say they were there to kill his ass.”

Blake took a sip of water. “And that’s what you want me to find out?”

“In a manner of speaking. Blake, we need you to find Fallahi and bring him over here for questioning.”

Bring him over? More like a kidnap.

Fallahi wouldn’t let Blake escort him over to the U.S.

Mike practically read his mind: “Yeah, I know you’re not too hot on these snatch-and-grabs, and neither am I. We need to get him before the Israelis or those Sharia whack jobs.”

“Got it. Intel?”

“On its way to you now. Check your secure site.”

Blake scanned through his incoming messages. He opened the file and perused the information.

“Assistance?”

“Our local sub-station team. Alan Foxx is the station chief. He’ll meet you on the ground when you get to Vienna and brief you on any new information they have.”

“Sounds good. Anything else?”

“No.”

Blake returned the receiver to its cradle and continued to study the classified information they had sent him. He had over an hour until he landed in Vienna.

Chapter Three

Vienna, Austria

10:20 (08:20 GMT)

July 18th

It was a windy day. Something uncommon for Vienna. Blake peeked out of the window and observed Alan Foxx as he stood on the tarmac. His left hand was white-knuckled as he held onto his toupee, struggling to keep it in place against the relentless winds.

The plane, braking, rolled near the black SUV parked nearby. Before the plane had come to a complete halt, the door opened, and the stairs deployed. Blake exited the plane and walked to the bottom of the stairs. Alan stepped forward and extended his right hand.

“Mr. MacKay, Alan Foxx!”

Blake accepted the gesture and shook. “What do you have for me, Mr. Foxx?”

“Please, call me Alan.” He gestured, and they strolled toward the SUV. “We know it was indeed Ansar al-Sharia carrying out the attack this morning. We’ve identified the bodies against our database of known terrorists and confirmed two of them. The other was an unknown, but we assume he was lower in the ranks, except we didn’t have any intel on him.”

They both entered the SUV. Blake was shuffling through photos. “And Mossad? Have you confirmed their involvement in this?”

“Not yet. They say they cannot confirm nor deny any involvement, which you know damn well means they’re involved. We can’t prove it yet. We’re continuing to monitor calls, but their encryption technology is as good, if not *better*, than ours.”

Blake nodded. “And what about Fallahi?”

“We’ve moved him to the Hotel Imperial. It’s in the center of the city and he’s rented the royal king suite and the room next to it for more of his entourage on their way here. He has men staying in the room with him as well.”

“Surveillance?”

“We’ve got a command center two floors below, and a spotter across the street.”

Blake handed the photos back to Alan. “Get me a schematic of the hotel and book me two rooms. Make sure one of them is on the same floor and next to Fallahi’s.”

“We can’t. He’s booked the entire floor.”

“You said he booked two rooms?”

“Yeah. Two rooms to stay in. The rest are to keep the floor empty. Paranoid little fuck.”

Blake frowned. “How disappointing. You need to think outside the box, Mr. Foxx.”

Blake tapped twice on his laptop. “Get me to the hotel. I’ll get my own rooms.”

With strong skills in computers, Blake had an exceptional understanding of networks and IT infrastructure. His knowledge of computer systems and how to hack them was second to none in the Clandestine Services. While still in the SUV, Blake hacked into the hotel’s system. He overrode the reservation adjacent to Fallahi’s and booked himself into another room under the alias of Dieter Shumacher.

#

There was a hint of fall in the air, another oddity for mid-summer in Vienna. The temperature was around fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, about fifteen degrees below normal, and the wind made it feel closer to fifty. However, the rain was gone, and the sun was out, which made it pleasant. Blake wore a light jacket, which helped to conceal his sidearm. He preferred to keep his Glock in the inside holster on his hip instead of tucking it into the small of his back. It made for faster access, and was more comfortable.

He went to the Hotel Austria where the early-morning attack happened. Yellow tape and police were still present. Blake flashed a fake Interpol badge to an officer and after a brief inspection of the I.D., the officer raised the tape and let Blake through.

Blake opened the file folder Alan Foxx had given him, and studied the information. With the help of the chalk marks on the street and sidewalk, he rebuilt the events unfolding in his mind’s eye. Blake’s main purpose was to get a better idea of who he was dealing with from Mossad, as they posed the biggest threat. Mossad wanted his mark dead, whereas Ansar al-Sharia only wanted to kidnap him.

Sifting through the pictures and seeing the chalk outlines on the street and sidewalk, Blake focused on the two outlines of the victims of sniper fire. Based on their positions and the size of the wounds in the photographs, he deduced the type of weapon used, and the direction and distance from where the shots came.

From his backpack, he retrieved his binoculars, peered through them, and pressed a button on the top, activating a laser. The light pinpointed the dead center of where he was looking and displayed the distance on the inside lens. Blake narrowed it to one building along the street: either the second or third floor.

He crossed the street and reached the building at the Griechengasse. On the second floor was a balcony with well-watered and cared for plants, and the tail of a cat swishing back and forth as it sunned itself. The floor above looked empty, and the best place to start. Blake walked the perimeter of the building and found a door. When he peeked through the window, inside, was a well-worn wooden staircase with a landing on the second floor. He entered the stairwell, climbed to the first landing, and then continued to the third floor.

Upon entering, it was clear it had been abandoned for a significant amount of time. Mustiness filled the air and permeated his nostrils. On his right, there was an open window. To his left, a Styrofoam container.

Fresh crumbs, no dust or mold. This is it.

He stepped to the window to examine the vantage point he estimated the shooter had. He spotted something suspicious on the windowsill and the floor next to the window.

“Fingernails. Well, I’ll be damned.”

#

Jaffa (Old Town Tel Aviv)

Two Years Ago

Blake and Solomon were finishing their dinner, celebrating a successful end to a mission destroying a ring of terrorists who were making fraudulent credit cards. They siphoned them back to al-Qaeda, who then used them to help finance their twisted cause. They had made shop in the West Bank, Israel’s backdoor—hence, the help from Mossad.

Their table was outside. To the west lay the Mediterranean Sea, black and void of anything, save for the lights from a few boats making their way back to the world's oldest port. To the north, modern Tel Aviv, the reflections of its lights merged with the sea, as it arched around and hugged the shoreline.

In between Blake and the view of Tel Aviv was Solomon Zinn, the beautiful but dangerous Mossad agent assigned to work with him on the mission.

Solomon was twenty-eight, with long black hair and piercing dark eyes. Her beauty and charming smile concealed numerous secrets, including the peril that befell those who incurred her wrath. She was an expert in close-quarter combat and a skilled marksman, handling herself as well as any of Blake's other partners.

Born in Tel Aviv and raised in Jerusalem, Solomon was the youngest of three children. She was supposed to have been a boy, at least according to the doctor who had read the ultrasound. His predictions were correct the first two times with her brother's, so who was to second guess him, when he predicted her sex early on during her mother's pregnancy?

Solomon's father was the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time of her birth, and rose in stature to become the Minister of Defense in her early teenage years. Both of her brothers had served in the military for longer than the required three years.

She had an older brother, twelve years her senior, who was killed in Afghanistan, but she possessed no desire to serve in the military beyond what was required of her. She didn't devote herself to her country, until a misguided missile attack by Syrians, killed her younger brother six years later.

It was a combination of her various assignments which made her an excellent candidate and eventual member of Mossad, Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, where she had been serving for the past six years.

After dinner, Blake and Solomon strolled south toward the old port. Blake stayed on a yacht supplied by Mossad. The pair found themselves in each other's arms after celebrating their mission's success with a nightcap.

For weeks, the sexual tension built up, and in the end, they both let go of their inhibitions and their desire for one another ran wild.

Within minutes, they were naked and exploring each other's bodies. They never made it to the bed. They made love on the couch, the chair, the floor, the table, and anywhere else that

would accommodate them. And some that didn't.

After several hours, they were sweaty and exhausted. They showered together, made love once more, and only then succumbed to the bed, where they slept in each other's arms for Blake's remaining few hours.

When Blake awoke, Solomon was sitting in the bed, with her back resting on the wall and her finger in her mouth. She spat and placed her finger back in her mouth.

Blake's brow furrowed. "What are you doing?"

"Biting my nails. Don't ask me why, it's a bad habit, I know. I've always done it."

"Wouldn't you like to have your nails so you can gouge someone's eyes out with them?"

"I'd never put myself in such a position." Solomon smiled. "Besides, if someone got so close, I've got about seven different ways to kill them."

Blake smiled. He put his hand on her thigh and his fingers crawled up. Solomon spread her legs.

The wail of a siren jostled Blake from his thoughts. He shook his head, put his hand to his crotch to adjust himself, and gazed out across the street where another police car parked in front of the Hotel Austria.

His phone vibrated, and he glanced at the call screen. It was Alan Foux.

"MacKay."

"Blake, it's Alan. Were you able to establish anything new at the scene?"

He glanced at the fingernails resting on the window ledge.

"Yeah. We may have a problem."

Chapter Four

Donaustadt

Vienna, Austria

23:00 (21:00 GMT)

July 19th

Warehouse 23 was vast and dark, save for a few sparse lights hanging high from the ceiling. Shadows, cast by the dim light, concealed their secrets. An office and a small break room were in the middle of the warehouse. There, four men bided their time playing cards until their shift ended.

Hans Dieter was having a good night. He'd won back three hundred euros, fifty shy of what he'd lost over the course of the past month. He tossed his winning hand onto the table and smiled.

"Ah, it looks like my luck is really with me tonight."

The other three moaned as he raked the thirty-two euros across the table to put with his already sizeable stack.

Hans stood and wagged a finger. "I have to piss. Make sure not to touch my stack, you losers."

Detlev, the man across from Hans, outstretched his arms. "Good. I need a break. Can you believe his luck tonight?"

Piotr, the oldest and the fattest of the four, stood up. He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Well, I'm going for a smoke. Maybe with him taking a piss and me having a smoke, it will cool off his luck."

Detlev nodded as he gathered the cards to shuffle them. Brian pushed back the chair and stood. He stroked his long beard and sauntered over to the coffeepot.

Pitor strolled to the entrance door and pushed to open it. A gust of wind slammed it back in his face. Pitor remained inside to light his cigarette and then forced the door open. He was

moving towards a row of uncoupled trailers outside, when a noise from the opposite side of the warehouse grabbed his attention. He stopped to listen when he heard the rattle.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

He took a long drag and threw the cigarette to the ground. He stepped with caution toward the building.

Mohamed Alzahabi had arranged for a cache of weapons to be delivered to Donaustadt, the warehouse district in Vienna. It awaited inspection in Warehouse 23. The wind still rolled across the city, and the noise from the loose metal panels lining the roof of the warehouse provided ample cover for Zafar, Abir, and the six other men.

Abir leaned toward Zafar. “Someone is coming,”

“Take care of him. We can’t let him see us.”

“Yes, Zafar.” Abir crouched in the shadows.

As Pitor rounded the corner, a sharp pain struck his abdomen. A glance revealed a hand covering the shaft of a large knife, now embedded in his side.

An arm cloaked in black. His assailant was now standing behind him. Another blade exited the front of his throat. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Hans stood at the urinal whistling, an obvious display of his pride and happiness for winning back most of the money he’d lost before.

The look on Marla’s face when she sees this stack of cash I won. Maybe I should stop and buy her some flowers on the way home. Perhaps the gesture will allow me to get a little action.

He finished urinating and turned around while zipping his fly. Standing before him was a masked man with a suppressed pistol pointed at his face. Before he could react, the 9mm round entered his head below his right eye and blew out the back of his skull, splattering the wall with fragments of bone and gray matter.

Detlev finished shuffling the cards and walked over to where Brian was adding two sugars to his second cup of coffee. “I’m down eighty euros. How much have you lost?”

“Shit, if I were only so lucky. Over one hundred and fifty, but I’m still ahead for the month, so

I'll let him have his night. Don't worry, I'm sure his luck will change."

"Well, it had better change soon. We only have about another hour to play before we need to prepare for the day shift to come in." Brian took a sip of his coffee and glanced at his watch. "Speaking of which, where the hell are those two?"

He started for the door that led into the main warehouse, when four men dressed in black entered the room and shoved him back.

"What the hell? Who are you?" He turned his head toward Detlev.

"Detlev, push the alarm!"

One of the intruders brandished a suppressed rifle, and it was only then the full gravity of the situation revealed itself to Brian.

In a three-round burst, bullets tore through Detlev before he made one step toward the alarm panel. The feathers ripped from his down-filled vest, filled the air and floated to the ground.

Brian raised his hands. "Oh, my God! Fuck! FUUUUCK! You killed him! What do you want?"

Now, understanding the full gravity of the situation, Brian surveyed the room, trying to determine who was in charge.

"I don't know the safe combination, if that's what you want. Please. I have a family." He focused on the floor. A tear landed near his foot.

At last, one of them stepped forward. He handed Brian a piece of paper.

"This container. Where is it?"

Brian took the sheet of paper. The color drained from his face and his hands trembled as he read the shipping number. "I, I don't know. I'll have to look in the system to search for its location."

Zafar pressed his rifle to Brian's head. "Do it!"

Brian cocked his head towards the office, never taking his eyes off the man standing before him. "It's in there. Please, please don't kill me. I'll do whatever you want."

Zafar stepped back. The other man raised his weapon and motioned for Brian to proceed

into the office.

The office was shabby and plain. The finish, once shiny, was now dull and worn from the foot traffic through the doorways.

Plastic-framed pictures of container ships and shipping cranes adorned the walls. On the far wall, to the left of the desk, was a bank of file cabinets. Brian sat at the faux wood and chrome desk and logged onto the computer.

The man in charge approached the desk. "Paper records. Where do you keep them?"

"Uh, in the file cabinets, over there." Brian pointed with his head as his eyes and fingers concentrated on the computer.

Zafar's attention shifted to the other two men. He motioned them to the file cabinets. The first of the two men tried the cabinet, but it was locked. The second man used a pry bar and forced it open. They rifled through the files until they found the hard copy they wanted. The man with the pry bar brought the paper over to Zafar and handed it to him. Zafar scanned it, nodded his approval, neatly folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"I'm losing my patience!"

"Okay, okay, I'm looking. It takes a minute."

"Where is it?"

"I found it! Section H."

Brian's head jerked as Zafar slapped him in the face. "Where is section H? Tell me now!"

"It's in the southwest corner of the warehouse. But it's stacked three levels high. You'll need a forklift to retrieve it."

"And you know how to drive this forklift, do you not?"

"Yes."

Zafar turned to Abir and the two other men. He told them in Arabic to take Brian to get the forklift and the container, wait until he loaded the container on the truck, then kill him.

Zafar turned to Brian and smiled. "You are doing well. If you continue to do as you're told, we will let you live."

Brian raised his head with hope in his eyes. "Thank you, thank you." As he tried to stand, the man with the rifle raised his hand and stopped him.

"First you must wipe out all records of this container. You must delete it from the system."

Brian nodded. "Yes, of course."

Zafar positioned himself so he could witness the records being deleted. Once satisfied, he retrieved a radio from his jacket. "Bring the truck."

After Brian finished, Zafar motioned him and the other men to go retrieve the forklift. Zafar went to the main garage door of the warehouse and opened it. The truck backed in.

Brian climbed aboard the forklift and started the engine. Abir raised the barrel of the H&K, pointed it toward Brian and motioned for him to proceed. Abir and the other two men walked alongside the forklift as it crawled toward section H.

Brian raised the boom and slid the forks up and under the container. Once the forks secured the box, he raised the boom and removed it from its stacked position.

Abir's radio came to life. It was Zafar.

"The truck is in the warehouse. Have him bring the container to the back door."

Brian negotiated the container off the stack and had it lowered and resting on the forks of the massive lift. The boom tilted several degrees backwards to keep it secure. Brian's captor again motioned with his weapon. "Come. We're to take it to the truck."

The engine bellowed, and the tires squealed, as Brian turned the massive lift to head back to the entrance, where the truck, Zafar, and the other men waited.

Brian drove the lift through the gloomy warehouse and rounded the corner to head toward the rear entrance. The man in charge stood by the flatbed trailer, surrounded by other men preparing to strap the container down.

Brian turned the wheels of the massive lift and angled it, in order to load the container onto the flatbed. He eased the lift forward as he lifted the container over the trailer. As he set the container down, the other men started securing it.

The man with the assault rifle went over and spoke with the leader. When they glanced back at him over their shoulders, a wave of fear, panic, and realization swept over Brian.

They're going to kill me.

When they turned their attention back to the container, Brian made his decision. The lift could drive at least forty kph. The cab, surrounded by steel, should provide him with some protection when they tried to kill him. Brian gunned the accelerator and took off in the opposite direction.

Abir raised the H&K and opened fire on full auto. Bullets ricocheted off the back of the lift. Brian ducked and started swerving on his way to the other side of the warehouse. As he swerved to the right, the forklift slammed into the bottom corner of a stack of containers. The top container wobbled but remained at the top.

He was at a dead stop. He glanced back. Four men were running in his direction. Brian floored the accelerator and pushed the stack of containers out of his way. The force was too much for the stacked boxes. The top container crashed down behind the lift, and helped to provide Brian cover from the gunfire, now coming from all four men behind him.

Abir stopped running. A sign hung from the ceiling and pointed towards the main door.

“He is going to the other exit. I'll cut him off! Keep following him!”

Abir darted across the warehouse, dodging through the stacks of containers to cut Brian off before he could escape.

They did not design the forklift to be driven at full speed and handle the tight corners. Brian turned the wheel hard left, but the lift fought back as the giant tires gripped hard on the concrete surface. The metal beast went wide right, and clipped a pole supporting the warehouse roof, jarring it loose from its foundation.

The thin metal roof shook and stopped short of caving in. Brian righted himself in the seat and pushed the heavy machine ahead at full throttle, aiming for the next support pole, ahead and to the left.

He hooked the left fork on the outside edge of the post and ripped it in two. The roof creaked and popped as it gave way against its own weight. A bullet ricocheted as it struck the steel cage, providing him with lifesaving cover. He then swerved to the right side of the lane and ripped the opposing post out from the floor.

The roof collapsed.

Broken Plexiglas fell in large shards and disintegrated as they hit the floor.

“Look out!”

An assailant dodged out of the way as a large piece of metal roofing crashed to the floor, almost hitting him. Brian flashed a satisfied smile in his rearview mirror.

His actions forced the men giving chase to fall back, but it also slowed him down. He took out two more support poles on his quest for the magical front door. It was less than fifty meters ahead. Brian mashed the accelerator.

Abir took an alley, created by the walls of containers on either side of him, and got into position next to the main traffic lane behind a container. He was approximately twenty meters in front of Brian. Abir listened to the hum of the engine as the forklift raced towards him. With his back against the container for concealment, the large fork tips came into his peripheral view. He spun out, faced Brian, and emptied the magazine into the coward infidel’s head. Blood and brains painted the inside of the driver’s cage.

Brian’s body slumped over the wheel, forcing it to turn hard right. Muscle reaction kept his foot on the accelerator. The forklift lurched forward at full speed into a bank of acetylene and propane tanks.

Abir’s eyes went wide. His mouth agape in shock. “Everyone run!”

He raced in the opposite direction at breakneck speed.

The lift punctured the tanks. As it kept moving, metal scraping on metal, ignited the deadly combination of gasses. The blast blew out the front wall of the warehouse and shook everything inside, sending anything not bolted down flying in every direction.

Everyone inside raised their arms to protect their faces, as the searing heat from an intense fireball sent flames shooting three hundred feet into the air. The light from the fire lit up the surrounding area, and the flames flashed like a beacon that stretched for miles.

The high walls of stacked containers protected Abir from the fire and shrapnel, but the sheer size of the blast’s concussion threw him forward and sent him sliding across the concrete floor. The powerful wave of the blast knocked the once-stacked containers back, and the rows of metal boxes started falling like dominos in his direction.

Another explosion of tanks rattled Abir back to reality and helped to push the remaining stacks of containers his way. He raised his head up. The stack closest to him gave way. Abir struggled to his feet and ran.

A third explosion rattled the entire building and a wall of containers tumbled to the ground, eight meters behind him. A third of the warehouse was now a raging inferno. Abir's radio crackled to life.

"Abir! Abir! Do you hear me? I've moved the truck outside. We're waiting on you. Abir!

Abir! Answer me!"

Abir tore around the last corner. He tasted blood and was running with an obvious limp.

Zafar was waiting for him.

Zafar waved, "Come! Come quick! Hurry, hurry, we must get out of here!"

Abir burst through the open doorway and jumped into the waiting van. "Go! Go!"

The van and semi-truck holding the container sped away, leaving the warehouse district in flames. Zafar glanced behind him. There were flashing police and fire truck lights in the distance. "Head away from them! Turn right and then left into that street! Hurry!" He pointed to a street twenty meters away.

The van peeled out in front of the semi, which followed as fast as possible. By the time the police and fire trucks entered the warehouse district, Zafar, his men, and their cargo were out of sight.

Zafar was gripping the steering wheel with both hands and smiled. "Now—now we have what we need to carry out our mission. Fallahi and his men will never know what hit them."

Chapter Five

Hotel Imperial

Vienna, Austria

08:30 (06:30 GMT)

July 20th

Kyle Moran, otherwise known as “Alice,” was a young, tall, and brilliant man on loan from DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. He was to test some of his latest creations in real-world scenarios. Alice got his nickname, not because of his gift to *look beyond the looking glass* and create cutting-edge technology, but his affinity for his hometown’s high school basketball team, known as *The Alice’s*.

Alan Foxx made the arrangements for Alice to deliver the morning breakfast to their target. His fluency in German and his youthful looks made him perfect for the task at hand.

Alice’s six-foot-nine frame made it impossible to get him a hotel uniform in time, so they went to a local big-and-tall clothier. There, they bought him a simple black suit, a white button-down shirt and black tie. His baby-faced looks, pimples and all, would eliminate any suspicion from Fallahi’s guards he was working for the CIA.

Alice had invented a microphonic thread. When woven into fabric, it worked as a microphone and was a powerful new technology, to turn everyday items like jackets, ties, hats or whatever you could imagine into a powerful listening device.

A wafer-thin, lithium battery provided power to achieve a unique combination of high energy, long shelf life, lightweight, and a wide operating temperature range.

For the past two days, Fallahi had a consistent order of hot tea, orange juice, two eggs, toast with raspberry jam and newspaper delivered to his room at eight-thirty sharp.

The staff always folded the newspaper three ways and tucked it in a blue cloth bag with the *Hotel Imperial’s* name and logo silk screened on the outside. They had created an exact replica using Alice’s technology, complete with the hotel’s logo. They sewed the battery into one of the two handles.

At eight-thirty, standing outside the door, Alice cleared his throat, calmed his nerves, and rapped on the door three times. The door opened and one of the Iranian guards answered the door. He raised his hand and indicated for Alice to stay put. Leaning out the door, he scanned the hallway in both directions, then took the tray from Alice and closed the door.

Alice went back to the room where the CIA had created a listening post. He was eager to test out his new technology. When Alice entered the room, two people, Bill Jackman and David Handle, were sitting around the computers listening to a conversation the newspaper bag was transmitting.

“How’s it working? Have you acquired any usable information yet?”

Bill chuckled, “Of course not, you just delivered the thing.”

David stood and stretched his legs, but stayed close to help Bill monitor the conversation.

“Well, it’s working. Unfortunately, they haven’t said anything to indicate what their next course of action is.”

Bill nodded. “Right. So far, we’ve listened to a conversation between two of the guards about making a bet on some cricket game between Pakistan and India. I thought these guys hated Pakis and Indians? Why would they care? Dave, you’re from Minnesota. Would you care about a hockey game between Russia and Czech Republic?”

“No, because I don’t like hockey.”

“You don’t like hockey? How the hell are you from Minnesota and not like hockey?”

David shrugged. “I never really got into it.”

Bill furrowed his brow and frowned as he glanced back at David. “What the fuck? Seriously? That’s like nerd boy here, being from Indiana and not liking basketball.”

Alice’s eyes widened. “Nerd boy? Who the fuck you calling nerd boy? Nerds live in their mom’s basement and play Dungeons and Dragons! I invent shit! I’m smarter than both you fucktards put together. And, for the record, I love basketball. I just can’t *play* it worth a damn.”

David motioned with his arms. “All right, all right. Everyone calm down. We can’t hear shit if we stand here throwing insults back and forth.”

The door to the room opened and Station Chief Alan Foxx entered. He put his hand in the small of Alice's back. "How'd it go, kid?"

"Short and sweet. I didn't have to say a thing. The guard grabbed the tray and took it inside. The cheap bastard didn't even give me a tip."

"Consider that suit your tip."

"Gee, Thanks."

Alan nodded to Bill and David. "Gentleman. Anything?"

David leaned toward Alan. "We were discussing that. There—"

Bill waved his hand to get their attention. "Shhh! I hear Fallahi,"

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Mohsen Fallahi, still wearing his powder blue pajamas, shuffled into the main room of the suite from his bedroom. He was a small, wiry man who stood five-feet-four. He replaced his shy demeanor with arrogance and a feeling of entitlement since he had been called back to run Iran's new nuclear program.

Fallahi had been a significant factor in pushing Iran into its nuclear age over the past two decades. However, according to intercepted emails and phone calls, Fallahi complained often about his work and funding being frozen by officials in Iran's government. Iran had "officially" halted its attempts to build a nuclear weapon in 2003. No one had known he was still alive until Mossad intercepted a phone call last week, detailing Fallahi's arrival back into Iran's nuclear program.

The call determined Fallahi was opening a research facility in Tehran's northern suburbs, and would be involved in studies relevant to developing nuclear weapons. There was also information intercepted, indicating many of the same scientists and military staff, who had been involved in the previous research a decade ago, would also be involved in the new research.

After further investigation, U.S. and Israeli intelligence also discovered Fallahi's closest colleagues had risen high in the ranks of the Iranian government, and now had influence over those who had earlier halted the development of nuclear weapons. His new role and increased importance to the Iranian government fed his arrogance.

He wore a trimmed beard and mustache cut close to the skin and rectangular gold-framed glasses. His skin was leathery and peppered with spots from the harsh Iranian climate. He was fifty-six years old but resembled someone in their mid-sixties.

He sat at the table and took a sip of his juice. "Kamal! When are we going to leave this place? I need to get back to Tehran! I am tired of waiting!"

Kamal Dalir was the man in charge of getting Fallahi back to Tehran. He was a former member of the Takvar, the Iranian Special Forces unit of the Iranian Army.

Kamal was sitting on a white couch with the television on. He plucked the remote from the table and hit the mute button. "I am waiting to hear back from Tehran. They are making the arrangements and are sending more men to protect you. You don't want another incident like the other day, do you?"

Fallahi took a bite of his eggs and then jabbed his fork in the air towards Kamal. "Do not lie to me. You know what the next plan is." He chewed and swallowed his food. "I demand to know how you plan on getting me back home."

Kamal stood from the couch. With narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw, he approached Fallahi. At six feet four and weighing two-hundred and ninety-five pounds, he dwarfed Fallahi as he towered over him. "I've told you. I do not know right now. Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"And why not? I need to know!"

"I am getting sick of your demands. I am in charge of protecting you and I will let you know when I feel it's time. Are you a fool? Someone could be listening in? Maybe there is someone across the street listening to this very conversation. Be patient! We will have you out of here soon enough. This conversation is over."

Kamal turned and sauntered back to the couch. Fallahi rested his fork on his plate after being chastised, pulling the newspaper out of the blue bag and opening it. On the front page was a story about the attack a few days ago.

"Look! Look at this! Now everyone knows who I am, and I am here! Now, what are we going to do?"

Kamal hurried back to the table and did a quick scan of the article. "I have to make a call." He reached into his pocket to retrieve his phone and scurried into the second bedroom.

#

Alan Foxx snapped his fingers twice. "He's making a call! Trace it. See if we can listen in."

David stood. "On it."

He rushed to his other computer and opened the tracing software. He fiddled with the controls and after a minute; he turned back toward the other men and shook his head.

Alan pounded his fist into his other hand.

"Dammit!"

Alan paced a few steps toward the door and returned. "Continue listening and keep monitoring the phone in case he makes another call. I guess all we can do at this point is wait and hope they make a mistake."

Chapter Six

Palais Hansen Kempinski Hotel

Vienna, Austria

14:15 (12:15 GMT)

July 20th

Solomon sat in the black leather desk chair in her hotel room with her eyes closed. She pinched the bridge of her nose. Her head was aching, despite having tried to ward it off.

The encrypted email she received from the head of Mossad, told her to expect a call within the next few minutes to discuss her mission. This was a call she was not eager to receive.

For one, this was the first time she had missed her mark, although she took some comfort in knowing it wasn't her fault. She had no intel about the attack coming from Ansar al-Sharia. If only they'd been a few seconds later. Secondly, the email said her father was going to be on the call, which was strange. He had never involved himself before, and she didn't understand why he would involve himself now.

Solomon tried to make herself comfortable. Her gray sweatpants and a tank top were soft and felt homey. No shoes. She stopped manually relieving the pressure in her head, and shuffled into the bathroom for some aspirin.

She shook two pills from the bottle. The throbbing reached a crescendo, so she shook another pill into her hand and popped all three into her mouth. While she chased them with a swig of bottled water, her phone rang. She gazed at herself in the mirror. "Well, here we go."

She hurried over to the desk and answered the encrypted phone. "Hello."

"Solomon? Efraim Zamir."

"Yes, sir."

"I've read your report on what happened. I take the blame. We should have known Ansar al-Sharia was in the area. Whatever crack they slipped through, we're working to fill it."

Solomon breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, sir. They literally came out of nowhere.”

“Understood. Now, let’s get you back on track to complete your task.”

“That’s what I plan to do, sir.” There was a minor relief from the pressure in her head.

“There’s been another development we think you should know about. I know it’s unusual, but I brought your father in to discuss it. I think you’ll understand why.”

“Hello, Solomon.”

She smiled. “Hi, Pa-pa.”

“How are you, Sweetheart?”

Solomon took a deep breath and ran her fingers through her long black hair. “I am good. I’m desperately trying to get this job done.”

“I know you are, and you will.”

His tone took on a more serious note. “Listen, we’ve gotten word the Americans are now involved. And, their objective will be much different from yours.”

“Nothing I can’t handle, Pa-pa.”

“And I appreciate you Solomon, but when you hear who they brought in, your feelings will change.”

Solomon reached into the back of her mind. A memory slammed into her like a falling stone. Goose bumps formed on her arms and legs. Her heart fluttered and there was a knot in her stomach.

She took a deep breath. She knew the answer before she asked the question.

“Well, who is it?”

“Blake MacKay.”

Solomon’s thoughts shifted back to their last night together on the yacht in Jaffa, and a queasy feeling intensified.

“Solomon?”

“Yes, Pa-pa.”

“I know you worked with him a couple of years ago and you think you know him, but let me tell you, he is a very dangerous man and will stop at nothing to reach his objective.”

A wry smile drew across her face. “I think I might know him a little better than you give me credit for, Pa-pa.”

“No, you don’t. He is the most lethal operative the Americans have. Now, as far as we know, they don’t know who we have involved in-country, but you can assume they know we’re involved, and what our intention is. MacKay’s mission is to retrieve Fallahi for questioning, and to prevent you from reaching yours. Do whatever it takes to prevent this from happening. Anything! Do you understand?”

“You mean—?”

“Yes!”

Solomon took a deep breath and hoped it wouldn’t come to that. She’d concentrate on finding her target and take him out and let the Americans sort out the mess.

“Pa-pa, do you know where MacKay is staying?”

“Yes. He is in the same hotel as Fallahi. The Hotel Imperial.”

The gears in Solomon’s head were turning. She planned to get close to Blake and take him out of the operation unharmed. “Okay, Pa-pa. I have a plan. The objective will be met within twenty-four hours.”

Chapter Seven

Donaustadt, Austria

19:00 (17:00 GMT)

July 20th

The Citroën van sat outside the warehouse door. Trying to be patient, Abir waited outside the warehouse. The large overhead door opened high enough for the van to drive inside and then closed. Abir stopped the van adjacent to the semi-truck. The container they'd stolen from the warehouse earlier was still sitting unopened on the flatbed trailer. Abir exited the van and walked towards Zafar. The other men congregated on the opposite side of the trailer. One was holding a set of bolt cutters.

Zafar greeted him. "Salam."

Abir motioned toward the lock. "Salam. Are we ready to open the container?"

"Yes. Now we are ready." Zafar nodded to Rauf to cut the lock.

Abir observed as Rauf cut the lock on the giant steel box. He removed it, tossed it aside. Next, he unfastened the latches and opened the twin doors; each of them groaning and screeching as they swung. Strapped to the floor and wrapped in plastic to prevent shifting, sat a single pallet stacked with boxes labeled "HDTV". Two other men, each with box cutters in their hands, climbed onto the trailer, entered the steel chamber and went to work removing the plastic that encased their contraband.

Abir smiled and turned to Zafar. "Will this be enough?"

Zafar nodded his approval. "Yes. They hid the weapons within the television in each box."

"Where did we get them?"

"Off of the infidels we have killed. But their actual origins, I do not know, and I did not ask. Sometimes it is better. Would you not agree?"

Abir nodded. "Yes." He continued to supervise the two men inside, removing the plastic and unstack the boxes.

Each man carried out a large box. Zafar snapped his fingers, and two men began hauling the rest of the contraband from the back of the flatbed to another area of the warehouse.

Abir and Zafar followed the first two men over to a table, where they each removed a television from its box. They removed the backs of the units and retrieved a complete, field stripped assault rifle, stuffed into various open areas of each television.

The first rifle assembled was a Heckler & Koch UMP submachine gun. The weapon was one of the most versatile submachine guns on the world market. It accepted three calibers by exchanging a few parts: 9mm, .40 S&W and .45 ACP. These were fitted for .40 S&W.

The second weapon was a Colt M4A1. Even though it was larger with a longer barrel, it supported the attachment of the M203A2 40mm grenade launcher, which was packed in several of the other boxes. All totaled, they received five H & Ks, four M4A1s, four M203A2s and eight Glock 23 pistols with suppressors. They filled the rest of the televisions with ammunition and grenades.

“This is excellent, Zafar. This will please my uncle.”

With narrowed eyes and pursed lips, Zafar turned to Abir. “For your sake, I hope he is.”

Before Abir responded, Zafar summoned the men over to the table where he had assembled the weapons.

“Tomorrow morning, right before the dawn, is when we will take Fallahi. Tonight, we rest, pray and eat.” Zafar reached for the H & K on the table and raised it in the air. “Tomorrow we will be victorious. *Allahu Akbar!*”

The other men all grabbed weapons and joined in. “*Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!*”

Chapter Eight

Hotel Imperial

Vienna, Austria

22:18 (20:18 GMT)

July 20th

After several hours listening to Fallahi with the team, Blake needed a break, so he went back to his room to plan. His best plans came to him while he was alone.

He stood in front of his door and checked the anti-intrusion app on his phone for good measure to make sure no one had tripped it. Gone were the days of leaving a hair strand on the door frame with saliva, although it still worked in a pinch. Nowadays, technology had replaced the old technique.

Blake had placed two small nodes to the inside of the door frame on opposite sides of the hinges. When the door was closed, they made contact with each other and completed a circuit. Powered by a wafer-thin battery, similar to the one in the listening device they placed in Fallahi's room, the tiny nodes communicated with a small box left inside the room connected to the hotel's Wi-Fi. If someone opened the door, the circuit would break, and a notification would appear on Blake's phone letting him know.

He had a king suite. It was one step below from the royal king suite Fallahi had, because it only had one bedroom instead of two.

Blake made a rapid survey of his room. It was clear. Satisfied, he took a deep breath and relaxed. He walked over to the bar and grabbed a rocks glass. He filled it with ice and reached for a bottle of Four Roses bourbon.

"Still have an affinity for bourbon, I see."

In a movement described best as muscle memory than a conscious decision, Blake withdrew his Glock and pointed it in the direction the voice came from. Standing against the door frame to his bedroom was Solomon, wearing nothing but a red silk negligée.

“Where the *fuck* did you come from? I checked the entire room.”

A smirk crossed Solomon’s face. “You didn’t check the balcony.”

“But I—I don’t *have* a balcony.”

Blake stepped past Solomon and into the bedroom. He went over to the window and slid the glass open. Outside the window was a twelve-inch ledge, protruding along the entire side of the hotel. Blake peered outside of the building at the street, and then towards the roof. He brought his head back inside and closed the window.

“We’re sixty feet up. How’d you get in here?”

Solomon pushed herself away from the doorframe and strolled seductively towards Blake. She held out her arms and embraced him. “Do you remember Jaffa?”

Blake sighed and then smiled. “How can I forget?”

They gazed into each other’s eyes before she closed hers and moved in for a kiss. Blake accepted her advance and enjoyed the moment. After a long, passionate kiss, Blake took a slow step back.

“Look. It is—great to see you. But I know why you’re here and you know why I’m here.”

Solomon raised a brow and greeted Blake with a frown. “So, what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is, I can’t let you kill him.”

“And who is this ‘him’ you are referring to?”

Blake sighed and frowned. “You know damn well who I’m talking about. Your habit gave you away.”

“My habit?”

“Yeah, your habit. You still bite your nails. I found bits of fingernails in the building across the street from the hotel where you first tried to kill Fallahi.”

Solomon took a step back and rolled her eyes. “Okay, you got me. Yes, I tried to kill Fallahi.”

Blake shrugged and stretched out his arms. “And...?”

“And—” Solomon’s eyes scanned the room before she refocused on Blake. She crossed her arms.

“I’m still going to kill him.”

“Why? Let me grab him and take him back for questioning.”

Solomon’s tone went from seductive to angry. “Questioning won’t do any good. That son of a bitch is going to help Iran get their nuclear program restored. You do know what Iran said about Israel, right? They want to wipe it off the face of the Earth.”

“Solomon. Let us question him. We can find out precisely where they are with their nuclear program. We’ll still be taking him out of the picture. Iran won’t have any access to him. As a matter of fact, they won’t even know we have him.”

“No. He’s been out of the picture for years. He doesn’t know anything about where they’re at now. You won’t get any information we don’t already know!”

Blake raised his hands. “Listen, I know you’re upset, but you don’t know for sure. We have to try.”

Solomon turned around and left the bedroom. She walked over to the bar, grabbed a glass, and filled it with ice. Blake followed her into the room.

“Solomon.”

Not answering him, she grabbed a bottle of Silk vodka, opened it and poured until the glass was half full.

Blake pressed. “Solomon!”

She shot back the vodka in a single gulp, and slammed the glass on the bar. Staring at Blake, she opened the bottle and poured herself another glass. “No. Like you, I have a mission to fulfill. I owe it to my country, and you’d do the same.”

Blake pressed his thumb and middle finger to his temples and closed his eyes. In a flash, his eyes opened, and he pointed a finger at Solomon. “Well, here’s an idea. What if we made it look like he was dead? It would look as if you completed your mission and I, mine.”

Solomon’s eyes danced around while she thought. She pursed her lips.

“Hmmm.”

She reached for the bottle of Four Roses bourbon. She opened it and filled Blake's empty glass, still resting on the bar.

"No. After questioning him, the Americans would let him go."

"No. He's not going anywhere, trust me."

"Still no. We would hear some chatter, eventually. Someone would say something. Mossad would find out and it would be my ass."

"And a nice ass it is." Blake smiled.

Solomon broke a smile and chuckled. She grabbed the drinks and strolled towards him. She handed Blake his glass. "I'll tell you what—let me sleep on it and we'll discuss it in the morning."

Solomon had no intention of thinking about it. She would complete her mission, even if it meant taking Blake out of the picture.

Blake accepted the glass from Solomon. "Fair enough."

They tapped glasses, and each took a sip of their drinks. Blake then took the glass away from Solomon and placed it on the table to his right. He reached his arm around her and pulled her in tight. He started kissing her neck, then moved around to her ears, and started sucking her ear lobes, something he remembered drove her crazy.

Solomon exhaled, while voicing her pleasure with a soft moan. She motioned Blake back into the bedroom. At the edge of the bed, Solomon pushed Blake on the mattress, flat on his back. A wry smile spread across her face as she reached around her back, untied her negligée, and let it fall to the floor.

Chapter Nine

Hotel Imperial

Vienna, Austria

05:14 (03:14 GMT)

July 21st

Zafar and the seven other members of his team climbed the southwest staircase of the Hotel Imperial to the top floor. They entered the hallway and headed southeast to the room where Fallahi was staying. Standing outside the door, they all chambered rounds into their weapons. One man, holding a 40mm grenade launcher, focused his attention on Zafar, who nodded. He splintered the door frame as he kicked it open. The door slammed into the inside wall.

The first two assailants entered the room. Two men on their right were in a broken sleep haze. Silenced terror shred through their bodies, killing them.

If the Libyans did one thing right, it was picking this time of day for their attack. Being jarred awake from a deep sleep, the body and mind aren't in synch. The Iranian men's momentary bewilderment bought Zafar and his men a few precious seconds.

Kamal, the Iranian commando in charge of Fallahi's protection, jumped to his feet in the second bedroom and grabbed his AN-94 assault rifle. He placed his back against the wall next to the door and judged the location of the two men who had breached the room. He spun around and opened fire into the main room.

The bullets shred through the chest of the first man and the left temple of the second. The first dropped dead, but the second emptied his magazine as he went down. His body spun to the left. Bullets stitched the wall and into the door of Fallahi's bedroom, as he opened it to investigate. Fallahi ducked seconds before lead ripped through the door.

Kamal waved at him. "Get down! Get down! Go into the bathroom! Stay there!"

He eyed the grenade launcher lying next to the first man's dead body. Kamal and two other guards were in the second bedroom. He pointed to them. "Cover me! I'm going to get

Fallahi.”

Both men nodded, and Kamal shoed three fingers and counted down. As Kamal left the room, the other two guards provided covering fire. They shot toward the main door, firing into the hallway as a third terrorist entered the room. Lead pummeled his chest. He fell backward out into the hall, finger on the trigger.

As he fell backward, the weapon discharged into the head of one of his brothers. A stray bullet hit Abir in the right shoulder and sent him to his knees in agony.

Kamal dove and rolled across the floor, grabbing the grenade launcher as he rolled. He stood and stepped backward towards Fallahi’s bedroom door, firing his rifle towards the threat outside the room. Bullets ripped through the plaster, filling the room with dust.

Standing a half meter outside the door with his back to the wall, another one of Zafar’s men waited for the barrage to stop. Feeling a lull, he swung himself into the doorway and let loose a 40mm grenade.

Kamal’s eyes widened. “Get down!” He slammed the door shut. The grenade exploded outside the room. The shrapnel ripped through the gut of one of the remaining two guards. His innards spilled out onto the floor. He screamed in agony. The last guard shot him in the head.

#

The sounds of the battle jarred Blake and Solomon awake. Blake threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. “They’re trying to grab him now!”

He put on his pants and shoes and ran out of the bedroom towards the door. Solomon followed him, wearing nothing but her negligée. Blake stopped shy of opening the door. He cocked his Glock and turned toward Solomon. “You ready?”

Solomon nodded. Blake opened the door and stuck his head outside for a quick look and pulled it back in. “I saw four in the hall. I don’t know how many there are in total.”

Blake hated hallways. He called them ‘tunnels of death’ because of their lack of cover.

“There’s no damn cover!” Blake checked again. “Across the hall is a small alcove where the candy machine is. I’m going to try to get in there. If I can tip the machine over into the hallway, it should provide us with some cover.”

Solomon grabbed his arm. "Wait! Are you crazy?"

"We're about to find out. When I take off, cover me."

Solomon readied her pistol. "Right."

A moment before Blake took off across the hall, a door opened, followed by more gunfire.

Dave, followed by Bill, exited the stairwell at the end of the hall, weapons drawn.

Blake recognized the situation. "Dave, no! Go back. It's too dangerous."

"No, it's okay, we're coming to you."

"No goddamnit, go back!"

Out of Blake's view, Zafar spotted the two agents. He pointed his weapon and opened fire. Dave didn't get off a single round. Bill retreated into the stairwell.

"Shit!" Blake pulled his phone out of his pocket.

The call connected. "Bill! What the fuck were you two thinking?"

"I dunno! We heard the gunfire and—"

"Stop! Shut the fuck up for a second! Are you shot?"

"No."

"Good. Get to the southeast stairwell and come up there."

"Got it."

Blake disconnected the call and checked the hallway.

"I'm clear! Now!"

Blake ran across the hall and took cover in the alcove as Solomon went low and provided cover. She stuck her arm out and fired blind from inside the safety of the room.

Sitting in the alcove, Blake made a quick peek to his right to get an idea of where any of them were. Gunfire erupted down the hall as one of them engaged another guard inside

Fallahi's suite. Blake glanced back at Solomon, who was staring beyond the door, and pointed to the fire extinguisher on the opposite wall. He took another peek and nodded his understanding. Blake held out his hand and counted down from three with his fingers.

Pushing himself off the covering wall, he fired a single shot into the fire extinguisher, sending its contents into the hallway, and providing him with a few precious moments of cover. With the strength of his legs, he leapt towards the candy machine, pushed out one side and then wedged himself in behind it. He pushed against the top of the machine and sent it crashing into the hallway on its side: bullets, fired with blind ambition, punctured the side of the machine.

"Solomon! Cover me!"

Determined, Solomon stepped into the hallway and fired with intent. Still blinded by the white fog filling the hallway, she fired three quick rounds. A scream of agony came from beyond the white mist.

Blake jumped over the fallen machine and laid prone behind it for cover. He raised his head enough to see movement through the dissipating mist and unloaded towards the silhouette.

Blake's barrage ripped through the top of a man's head as he was inspecting the damage from Solomon's hit.

#

Abir wiped away the blood and brains from his face with his sleeve in disgust.

Inside Fallahi's bedroom, Kamal turned to Fallahi. "Listen to me very carefully. We need to get you to the train station. From there, you will fly to Victoria, Malta. You will take a taxi to the port in Mgarr Harbour, where you will meet this gentleman." Kamal handed Fallahi a photo. "His name is Bady, and he will put you on a boat to Beirut. He has contacts there who will get you back to Iran."

Fallahi was breathing in short, rapid bursts. His eyes were wide. "You're not coming with me?"

"Calm down. You'll hyperventilate. Yes, I am. But I'm telling you this in case I don't make it. Now you know your plans. We need to get you out of here. When I say run, you run as fast as you can into the other bedroom and into the bathroom. Get in the tub and lie down."

“What are you going to do?”

“Dammit, do as I say! Now go. Now!”

Kamal stood and fired towards the door. Fallahi ran as fast as his legs would move into the second bedroom’s bathroom, as Kamal had instructed. As Fallahi ran into the other room, Kamal loaded a fresh magazine into his weapon and grabbed the grenade launcher.

He fired again towards the door as he ran across the main room of the suite. When he got to the other side, he flipped around the M203. He turned to the remaining guard. “Get into the bathtub with Fallahi. Now!”

He turned toward the back wall and launched a grenade. The wall exploded. The dust and debris settled and revealed a gaping hole leading into the southwest stairwell.

“Both of you, come now. Go, go, go!”

Fallahi and the other guard ran from the bathroom and to the hole. Kamal motioned for them to come. Fallahi stepped onto the broken concrete where the wall had been.

Kamal narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “Jump!”

Fallahi hesitated as he judged the distance to the landing.

“Jump dammit!”

The remaining guard, Ahmed, nudged Fallahi to go. He jumped and landed without incident. Ahmed shouldered his weapon and followed.

Hearing the explosion, Zafar motioned to the survivors of his team back towards the southwest stairwell. Zafar opened the door and retreated as gunfire splattered towards the door from inside the stairwell.

Sweating, Zafar took a deep breath and raised his arm. “Wait!”

He positioned his ear against the door and listened to the stamping of feet as they faded to oblivion.

“They’ve gone to the ground level. Come!”

Blake sat on his knees, bent over behind the candy machine. He ejected his spent magazine and replaced it with a fresh one. He focused on the opposite end of the hallway. "I think they've left. We have to—"

With the butt of her pistol, Solomon whacked Blake hard on the back of the head, knocking him out cold. She turned towards the southeast stairwell to be faced by Bill.

She rushed and side-kicked him in the abdomen. Bill bent over in pain. She grabbed his head and drove her knee hard to his forehead. A quick chop to his throat. An uppercut from her elbow delivered the fatal blow, forcing the cartilage from his nose into his brain.

She dashed into the stairwell and started descending the four floors, skipping every other step. On the first landing, she met Alan Foxx. Without hesitation, she delivered a powerful front kick to the chest that hurled Alan to the bottom of the flight of stairs. His head bashed against the concrete wall, knocking him unconscious.

Chapter Ten

Hotel Imperial

Vienna, Austria

05:40 (03:40 GMT)

July 21st

Fallahi, Kamal and Ahmed entered the parking garage below the hotel and ran to one of the Range Rovers. Ahmed kept turning back toward the doorway, his weapon primed.

Meanwhile, Zafar stopped at ground level. "Go get the van. Wait for me outside."

Abir turned to Zahmir while applying pressure to his bloody shoulder with a towel. "You drive!" He dug into his pocket and handed Zahmir the keys.

Zafar entered the parking garage. He stopped, and listened for footsteps, or other clues to aid in his search for Fallahi. From his right, came the echoes of the Range Rover's engine and the squeal of its tires as it rounded the corner towards him.

Zafar raised his weapon and fired over a row of compact cars towards the approaching vehicle. The bullets ricocheted off the bullet-proof glass, puncturing holes in the cement walls and surrounding cars.

Kamal swerved the Range Rover toward the row of parked cars Zafar had fired over moments ago. He slammed into them and sent two careening towards the terrorist. Zafar retreated, narrowly missing being hit. He then turned and ascended the stairs and out to the street where Abir and Zahmir were waiting.

The silver Range Rover sped out of the garage and turned right, heading for the train station. Zafar ran to the waiting van, threw open the door, and slid inside. "Go! Go! The Range Rover. Follow them!"

#

Solomon stepped out of the hotel. To her right, two vehicles were speeding away. The sun was cresting on the horizon and the streets were still empty, save for a few early risers.

The headlights of a BMW shining in her face as it turned the corner alerted Solomon. She ran into the street in front of the car and raised her hand to make it stop. She pointed her weapon at the driver as she moved around to the driver's side. Only when she pointed the pistol at the driver's head did he notice her weapon. He was too busy staring at the stunning woman who stood before him half naked. She reached in and pulled him from the car, leaving him lying on the street as she took off in pursuit.

#

Blake regained consciousness and rubbed the back of his head. He'd been out for only a couple of minutes, didn't know how much time had passed. The chemicals from the fire extinguisher had settled. Bill's crumpled body was lying a few yards from Blake. He called out for Solomon. A split-second later, he realized what had happened.

"Fucking bitch!"

Still shirtless, Blake managed to stand. He stumbled over to Bill's lifeless body, removed his sport coat, and put it on himself. He then grabbed Bill's Glock and two spare magazines. Still trying to regain his balance, he hurried to the southeast stairwell and started his descent. On the landing below, Alan was lying, out cold, but breathing.

He patted Alan on the cheek. "Don't worry, I'll get her." Blake reached for Alan's phone, but then hesitated. Inside his coat pocket, he found Bill's phone. Blake continued as fast as possible to the ground level. The door emptied him onto the street. There was a wail of approaching sirens.

Squealing tires and the roar of the BMW's engine as it sped away, and the man sitting in a daze in the street, told Blake all he needed to know about how long he'd been out. Shifting his attention to the BMW, the car disappeared as it screeched around the corner.

Across the street was the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, or Music Museum. Out front, a courier delivering an early morning package had left his motorcycle running as he waited by the front door for a signature. Blake ran across the street and jumped on the bike. With one foot on the ground, he did a quick one-eighty and sped off to join the pursuit.

#

Around the corner, the Range Rover had already made its second right turn, and was approaching the next intersection to turn left and head back north. Zahmir and the other terrorists were right behind them. The small van slid, tires screeching, as it turned hard

right. Zahmir pointed. "Shoot at them!"

Zafar raised his hand and shook his head. "No. It's armored. It will not do any good. Go faster and ram them."

The sound of bullets hitting the back of the van startled all the men inside. Instincts kicked in as bullets ricocheted off the van. Abir went prone in the back. "There is someone behind us!"

Zahmir glanced in his side mirror as the headlights of the BMW gained on them. A bullet hit the rear window and shattered the glass. Zafar turned back to Abir. "Get off the floor! Shoot back, you fool!"

Abir pointed the barrel of his M4A1 out the back window, and fired two, three-round bursts. The first of the three bursts went wide to the left of Solomon, but the second burst punctured the passenger side of the hood twice, with the last round penetrating the windshield. She swerved wide and to the left. She missed an oncoming car, forcing it off the road and onto the sidewalk.

#

Blake had rounded the second corner in time to witness the near head-on collision. He gunned the bike to gain ground between him and Solomon. Muzzle flashes came from the rear of the van. He withdrew his Glock and fired off two rounds at the van, aiming toward the flash, but hit nothing.

#

The Range Rover made another right and then a sharp left onto the Stubenring and headed for the Wein River. As the Range Rover made the sharp left, it clipped the corner of a small Volkswagen and sent it spinning into the intersection. People screamed and fragments of the car littered the road. The van followed. It swerved to miss the car, but hit a pedestrian. The body smashed into the passenger side of the windshield and rolled over the van's roof, before coming to rest in the middle of the intersection. Less than two hundred feet behind the van was Solomon.

A policeman sitting across the street and heading west witnessed the accident and took off in pursuit of the van and Range Rover.

#

As Solomon rounded the corner, she caught sight of the flashing police car lights in pursuit of the van. A body laid in the road. She cut the car hard left to miss it. Blake cut the corner and onto the sidewalk. He slammed on his brakes and turned the bike sideways and stopped before hitting a parked car.

Blake focused on where Solomon went. She turned left on the Stubenring, still hot in pursuit of the van. The Stubenring was a wide, multi-use street. In the middle were three one-way lanes. On either side were trees and sidewalks. The outside lanes from the trees were single lanes. One went the same direction as the middle and the other went in the opposite direction.

As Solomon took off, Blake turned left in pursuit. An oncoming car forced him into the parking lane. He reached her and pulled parallel to the car as they were speeding along the boulevard.

“Hey! We had a deal!”

Solomon accelerated and sped ahead of Blake.

“Shit!”

Blake focused forward, and a car approached him, flashing its lights. He found a cut-through to the right. The bike hit the curb and launched into the air. Blake landed on the road behind Solomon and he gunned the throttle. He steered to the passenger side of her car and waved.

“Hey!”

Solomon cut the wheel to the right to knock Blake off the bike. Blake reacted and steered toward the sidewalk. “Damn bitch, I swear to God—”

#

Abir was breathing fast. He was loading another magazine with ammunition. “We have the police behind us!”

Abir pointed his weapon out the window and fired. All six bullets went into the windshield of the police car. He shot the driver through the head. The car careened off to the left, slamming into a tree lining the street.

#

Solomon passed the accident and sped up. She was doing 125 mph in a 35-mph zone.

Blake didn't reduce speed for the accident either, instead giving his bike full throttle.

His bike was only 125cc's with a maximum speed of 95 mph. Solomon reached the van as they were about to cross the bridge over the Wein River. The Range Rover and van swerved around a fuel truck. As they did, they forced oncoming traffic to the left, and one truck hit the side of the bridge, smashing the concrete barrier, sending debris into the water below.

As the van swerved back in front of the truck, the driver of the fuel truck slammed on its brakes, causing the truck to skid sideways and stop. Solomon slammed on her brakes and stopped a safe distance behind the truck.

Abir raised the M203 and fired a grenade at the truck. The explosion, mixed with ten thousand gallons of diesel fuel, sent a mushroom of fire three hundred and fifty feet into the air.

The blast force knocked several cars into the river below.

#

Blake arrived at the bridge as the explosion detonated. The blast wave pushed him hard to the left. He had no time to react. He slammed on his brakes, but it was too late. Blake hit the side of the bridge, head-on, and flew off the bike, tumbling thirty feet into the water.

#

Solomon witnessed Blake go over the side of the bridge. She hurried out of her car and ran over to investigate. She tried to shield herself from the intense heat blazing from the wall of fire over a hundred feet in front of her.

When she reached the side of the bridge, she tried to find Blake. He was swimming to the edge of the river. Blake caught a glimpse of her on the bridge. When he pulled himself out of the river and turned to her, she was gone.

The heat was unbearable. Solomon raced back to her car and turned to find another bridge. Too late! Sirens blasting, three police cars skidded to a stop, and six officers jumped out, weapons drawn and aimed at her.

"Halt! Hände hoch! On your knees. Cross your legs."

#

As Blake climbed the riverbank and turned, Solomon was being placed in one of the police cars. It didn't matter; she had diplomatic immunity and would be free within the hour. As Blake's attention drew to the sound of screeching tires echoing from across the river, he caught sight of Fallahi's Range Rover speeding away, followed closely by the van.

"Son of a bitch!"

The company treats all agent's phones with Liquipel, which makes them resistant to water and other moisture. The phone in Blake's water-soaked jacket rang.

"Yeah?"

"Bill?"

"No, this is Blake. Who's this?"

"This is Alice. Where's Bill?"

"Dead."

There was a long pause on the phone. Blake Sighed. "Come on, kid, what is it? You got something?"

"Yeah. Sorry. This is the first time—"

"Spit it out! Whataya got?"

"Right. Sorry. I heard them speaking in the room—"

"Come on, I don't have a lot of time!"

"The train station. They're going to the train station and taking the early morning train to Geneva."

Blake ended the call and assessed his surroundings. A crowd of onlookers started to gather. Cars were moving slow and a small traffic jam had started. Taking a car would do him no good. Blake ran across the street and took a street heading west, away from the accident. When traffic thinned, he searched and found his mark. A gray Mercedes sedan stopped at a traffic light.

#

The Range Rover made a sharp left turn and headed back over the river towards the train station. Zahmir ran a red light. Behind them, two cars slammed on their brakes and collided. The Libyans were now thirty yards behind their target. They were less than two kilometers from the train station and the streets were filling with early morning commuters. The sun had broken the horizon now, and the sky was getting lighter.

Abir focused on the car in front of them. "Zafar, shoot at their tires."

Zafar leaned out the side window of the van and opened fire at the tires on the Range Rover. None of the bullets hit their intended target. A few hit the rear tailgate, and the rest ricocheted off the pavement and went in errant directions. People near the shooting screamed and ran wherever there was cover.

#

Fallahi crouched in his seat. "They're shooting at us again."

"Everything on this vehicle is bullet proof. Including the tires."

Kamal turned to the driver. "How much further?"

"We'll be there in two minutes."

"I am tired of this nonsense." Kamal grabbed the grenade launcher.

"Ahmed, when I tell you, lower the rear window."

Ahmed's eyes shifted to the rearview-mirror and nodded to Kamal.

#

Gunfire and screaming echoed through the streets from a few blocks away to his west. He opened the door of the Mercedes and spoke to the woman in German. He told her it was a police emergency. The woman screamed and resisted.

With an authoritative force, Blake repeated himself. The woman relented and moved over to the passenger seat. Blake put the car in gear and tore forwards, towards the train station. He swerved around two slower moving cars and dodged back into his lane as another car was approaching him. The woman screamed and cupped her hands over her eyes.

#

He positioned the M203 and took aim.

“Now!”

He fired the grenade as Ahmed swerved around a pedestrian. The grenade went wide right and hit a car parked on the side of the road.

“Keep it straight!”

The explosion destroyed the car and sent debris flying in all directions. Zahmir accelerated to get closer to the Rover.

Zahmir’s eyes were wide with surprise. He pointed toward the Rover. “Look, his rear window is down! Shoot him now!”

Zafar leaned out the window again and fired two, three-round bursts towards the Rover.

Bullets ricocheted off the back of the Rover. One found a way in and hit the back of the headrest.

Kamal put his hand on Fallahi’s head and pushed him into the seat. “Get down.”

He loaded another grenade into the chamber and fired, this time hitting the road a few meters in front of the van. The van’s front wheel hit the crater and lurched hard right. It spun out of control and into the intersection, clipping the front right fender of the car next to it.

Zahmir fought against the wheel, regained control and accelerated in pursuit.

#

Blake pulled hard on the handbrake and slide sideways around the corner to the left. Pressed against the window was Blake’s passenger. Her eyes, wide in terror and her mouth gaping open. She let out a piercing scream.

Blake chuckled.

#

Kamal cocked the grenade launcher, but the weapon was empty. “Dammit!” He inspected the magazine in the M4A1. Fourteen rounds left.

“How much further?”

“It’s right there! Thirty seconds!”

Kamal aimed the rifle out the rear window and fired in three-round bursts until the weapon was empty. The third burst connected with the center of the driver’s side windshield and ripped through Zahmir’s head.

His lifeless body fell on the steering wheel and caused the van to lurch hard right. It slammed into the rear of a small hatchback. The collision forced the van into the air. It came crashing to the pavement on its side.

It slid over one hundred feet before coming to rest on its side in the middle of the road.

Abir stumbled to his feet and kicked the rear doors open. Zafar groaned with the strain of his seatbelt against his chest. Abir helped him out of his restraints and into the rear of the van.

Sirens were blaring in the distance and getting closer. Abir helped his colleague up. “Come on, come on! We are close. We can run from here.”

They hid their weapons under their jackets and ran from the scene. Even though he was only thirty seconds behind them, by the time Blake got there, traffic, including the side streets, was blocking his path. He stopped the car and slammed his fists into the dash of the car.

“Shit!”

Chapter Eleven

Vienna Train Station

Vienna, Austria

05:57 (03:57 GMT)

July 21st

Kamal, Fallahi and Ahmed entered the last car of the train. Kamal had flashed his diplomatic credentials to the conductor and spoke with his superior to arrange for the last car to be private to them.

The car was a first-class lounge car. Leather couches sat with their backs against the windows, so the amount of floor space was ample for movement inside the car.

There was a stocked bar, though Fallahi and his men would only drink the water and tea. A large private restroom was forward, near the exit to the other cars. Ahmed peered out the windows of the train as he drew the shades. Kamal stood guard at the rear of the train, while Fallahi sat, grasping his chest. His heart pounded from the recent excitement.

“Ahmad, do you see anything?”

Ahmed shut the last of the shades. “No.”

Kamal approached and put his hand on Fallahi’s shoulders. “Relax. The train leaves in less than three minutes. There are five more trains here, all bound for different destinations. Even if they escaped the wreck unharmed, they still would have the police to—”

“And if they escaped the police?”

“They don’t know our destination. They would be a lucky to guess which train we were on.”

The train jostled as it began to move forward. Fallahi sighed with relief and his nerves calmed.

#

Abir and Zafar wore traditional clothes for the area. Before their mission began, they had shaved their beards to blend in. However, now they had to be extra careful. Two dark-skinned men slipping into a restricted area at a major transportation hub would arouse suspicion in today's political climate.

With luck, they made it through the bowels of the train station unseen and came out onto the platform where the six a.m. train to Geneva waited.

Zafar mentally counted the train's cars.

"Abir. There are eighteen cars on this train. How do we search it? How do we know where he is?" He turned and headed down the side of the train, focused on passengers inside.

Abir tapped Zafar with his good arm. "Don't turn, but one of Fallahi's men just drew the shade on the last car."

Zafar checked the round clock hanging from the station's ceiling as the hands moved to six o'clock.

"Let's go!"

Abir and Zafar, ran towards the train and jumped on as it crawled out the station.

#

Blake ran into the train station at full speed. He pushed his way through the morning travelers and hurdled the ticket gate. A whistle blew.

"Hey! Halt! You there—"

Two security guards pursued him down the stairs and to the tracks. The last car of the train had passed the end of the platform as Blake reached the tracks. He ran to the end of the platform. It was too late.

"Halt!"

One of the security guards latched on to his right arm. Blake spun around and connected with the guard's jaw with a left hook. The other guard approached him from his left and Blake hit the man in the face with his left elbow, breaking his nose.

He then turned back right and delivered a devastating front kick to the chest. The guard flew backward off the platform onto the tracks. He turned back left and punched the second

guard squarely in the forehead, knocking him out as he hit the ground. Blake assessed his situation. Three uniformed police officers were closing in with their batons in hand.

Blake raised his hands. "Wait! I'm going to show you my credentials."

He reached into his front pants pocket and withdrew his fake Interpol I.D

The first officer to reach Blake grabbed the I.D. and read it.

Satisfied, he motioned with his hands for the others to lower their batons. "Anything we can do to help?"

"No, and I can't discuss it."

The officer motioned for Blake to leave. "Next time, identify yourself before assaulting our men."

Blake waved and nodded. He turned and placed a call to Alice.

"Hello?"

"Alice, it's Blake. You said you knew where they were going?"

"Yeah. Geneva."

"I need to get on the train. It already left."

"Good luck. It's the express. Non-stop. And two hundred miles per hour, too."

Alan Foxx was in the room, nursing his head with an ice pack. He motioned for Alice to give him the phone.

"Blake, it's Alan."

"Hi Alan, How's your head?"

"I'll live. I'm not up-to-speed on all that's happened, but it's a total shit storm here; the halls and rooms all shot up, a hole blown through a wall, dead guys lying all around, including our own. The police are here, and guests are all out on the street— Oh, and some bitch kicked my ass."

"Yeah, well, that *bitch* is a Mossad agent named Solomon Zinn. She's the one trying to kill Fallahi."

“Where is she now?”

“Cops got her while we were chasing them down. She’ll be out within the hour. Alan, I need to get on that train.”

“Okay. Let me see what I can do. I’ve got to clear some of this shit here, but meet me at the sub-station in an hour.”

“No. It’s less than three hours to Geneva by train, and I need to get on it as soon as possible. I’ve got no idea what Solomon’s planning, but believe me, she is relentless. I need to do something. And now.”

“Okay, go to the sub-station. I’ll be there as soon as I can leave here. Thirty minutes tops.”

Blake clenched his jaw. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation. I need to leave—now!”

Alan sighed. “You’re at the train station now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, go out front. I have an idea.”

Chapter Twelve

Vienna, Austria

07:34 (05:34 GMT)

July 21st

Alan had arranged for a chopper to take Blake to rendezvous with the bullet train now barreling toward Geneva. Alice came along for the ride to instruct Blake on how to use some new technology he'd developed.

By the time they reached the train, it had traveled two-thirds of the way to Geneva. Alice was across from Blake. He leaned forward and tapped Blake on the knee.

"Mr. MacKay. The train is about to enter a section of track with multiple tunnels. This will be our best opportunity to get you on board. It is required to lower its speed to eighty kilometers per hour as it passes through the tunnel. It has to maintain speed until the last car exits."

Blake raised a thumbs-up and a nod to Alice.

Alice pointed out to the horizon. "We'll wait for the train to exit a tunnel and then match its speed."

"Okay. Then what?"

Alice smiled. "The fun part." He nodded toward the rope ladder. "You'll need to be on the ladder, because even at eighty kilometers per hour, you'll only have twenty seconds, at best, to get on the train."

"I know, Alice. This ain't my first rodeo. You said you had some new technology to help me to get him off the train. What is it?"

Alice reached for two backpacks and handed one to Blake. "These!"

Blake shook it. "It's heavy. What in the hell is in here?"

Alice smiled. "It's not what's in them, it's what they do. I got the idea off of an invention

some Swedish women made, called the invisible bike helmet, but instead of only protecting your head, this protects your entire body.”

“That doesn’t tell me shit, Alice. What does it do?”

“It’s a giant airbag. It deploys around your whole body. It’s powered by battery accelerometers and gyroscopes. When it detects irregular body movement, it inflates in a fraction of a second, and surrounds your whole body in a big bag of air. It’s like being in a giant ball.”

Blake chuckled. “You’re shittin’ me. And what do you want me to do with them?”

“One’s for you and the other is for Fallahi. Put this on him and throw him off the back of the train before you exit the tunnel. It’ll inflate and you’ll both bounce along the tracks, protected, before you come to a stop.”

“Are you fucking crazy?”

“No! Trust me. It works. There’s also a manual switch here if you don’t trust the gyroscopes.” Alice showed Blake the red tag. “But you’ll understand how the gyroscopes work when you throw Fallahi off first. He can be your guinea pig.”

Alice smiled as he handed Blake the second pack.

The pilot chimed in over the headset. “Two minutes, Mr. Mackay.”

After handing Blake the two backpacks, Alice showed him his laptop screen.

“Blake, Alan got an infrared satellite picture. We believe they are in the last car of the train, which is good. We’ve also had some ground agents spot the train as it went by, and they have reported all the shades on the last car are closed.”

Blake nodded. “That makes sense.”

As the helicopter came over the top of the mountain, the pilot lowered it above the tunnel exit. Hovering sixty feet over the tracks, Blake opened the door and threw out the rope ladder. Blake removed his headphones and put his radio in his ear. Alice did the same. As Blake put on his backpack, Alice tested the radio. The wind and noise from the rotors made it difficult to hear.

“Mr. Mackay!”

“Yeah!”

“The next tunnel is ten kilometers away! The train will speed up, but not to full speed! It will accelerate to approximately a hundred and twenty! You’ll only have about five minutes until it reaches the next tunnel!”

Blake mumbled under his breath, “*Fucking great.*”

Alice leaned toward Blake while pointing to his ear. The rotor wash blew his hair straight back. “What?”

“Nothing! Any other great news?”

“I’m afraid so! The next tunnel is two kilometers long! After the tunnel, the track splits and becomes two! The express train *from* Geneva will be approaching from the opposite direction! You’ll have less than ten minutes to get Fallahi out of the tunnel and to the other side where we’ll be waiting!”

Blake put the other backpack for Fallahi across his chest. He produced a final thumbs-up for Alice. “Awesome. See you on the other side.”

Alice smiled and nodded as the green light came on, indicating it was time for Blake to go.

Blake hung from the ladder six feet above the tunnel exit. “I hear the train coming. Start moving.”

The helicopter started forward. When it got to approximately sixty kilometers per hour, the train exited the tunnel and Blake started a stopwatch on his wrist. “Speed up!”

The helo matched the train’s speed.

“Can you get me lower?”

The pilot adjusted and Blake came within three feet of the train’s roof.

Blake jumped and landed on the car. He stumbled but regained his balance.

“Okay, I’m good.”

The helo spun off, away from the train, and fell back. Blake made his way towards the back of the train.

#

Abir and Zafar were in the car ahead of Blake. They'd been assessing of all the passengers for any potential threat once they try to grab Fallahi. The train was on an express route, and they couldn't do anything until they got to Geneva.

The whirling of the helicopter's blades got Abir's attention. He pulled back the curtain enough to peek out the window and caught a glimpse of the outer arc the blades made as they sliced through the air. When the chopper took off, a ladder dangled, swinging in the air.

Abir hurried over to Zafar, who was napping.

"Zafar! Wake up!"

He opened his eyes. "What is it, brother?"

"I fear they have dropped someone on the train."

"The American? That bitch?"

"I don't know; probably the American. The police were closing in when she got to the bridge. They could have taken her."

"If you did not see them, take her, then you know nothing! Go. Go and find out who it is. I'll be behind you in a moment."

#

Blake traveled the roof of the train for one more car, climbed over the side and into the open window in the space in-between the cars. Once inside, he glanced at his timer he set for five minutes:

4:16.

Blake took a quick peek into the next car toward the back of the train and didn't see anything suspicious. Passengers were reading, having coffee or working on their laptops. He was still two cars away from the last car where Fallahi was believed to be. He turned his head behind him and did a double take. Walking towards him was Abir, one of the men he'd seen at the Hotel Imperial.

They made eye contact, and Abir stopped. Abir reached into his jacket pocket. Blake suspected what was coming next. He slid open the door, entered the car and ran towards

Abir. Three steps away, Abir drew his pistol and pointed it at Blake. A woman next to Abir screamed when she observed the pistol. It started a chain reaction of screams and shouts. Those who were closest pressed themselves against the windows and each other to distance themselves from the man with the gun.

Blake's training kicked into high gear. With his left hand, he grabbed Abir's wrist and bent it back, so the pistol pointed back at the terrorist. Abir contorted in pain. Blake put his right hand on the top of the pistol, released the slide and pulled it off, rendering the weapon useless. With his left hand still on Abir's wrist, Blake pulled him closer, and slammed his right fist square into Abir's nose, knocking him back.

A trickle of blood came from Abir's nose.

Blake smirked. "Ya like that, bitch?"

Abir put his finger on his upper lip and inspected it for blood. His face tightened with anger, and he threw the frame of his useless pistol at Blake, who batted it down. Blake positioned himself like a wrestler, waiting for Abir's next move.

"That's right. Come on. Let's see what you've got."

Angered, Abir charged at Blake. As he dived, Blake grabbed Abir and fell backward. He used Abir's momentum to flip him over and into the door to exit the car. Blake stood and delivered Abir a side-kick to the chest, knocking him through the door and into the space between the cars. The passengers screamed again.

Blake rushed Abir. He grabbed him by the shirt collar and slammed him into the door of the next car. Abir managed to push Blake away from him and reached into the small of his back and withdrew a knife.

Blake grabbed Abir's other arm and twisted it behind him and pushed him into the last car's door frame. The commotion attracted the passengers' attention in the next car. Curious passengers came to see the commotion. Blake then grabbed Abir's arm and slammed it against the door window three times, forcing Abir to drop the knife. More passengers started screaming and calling for a conductor.

#

The commotion drew Kamal's attention. He stood and cocked his head in concentration.

"Ahmed. Go. Find out what is happening."

Ahmed opened the door and entered the space between the cars. Squinting to focus, on the other end of the next car was the face of a man he recognized. His face was pressed against the glass as if he was being held.

He went back into the train car. "It's that man that was chasing us in Vienna. He was fighting with someone."

"Who?"

"I couldn't see."

Kamal wrinkled his nose. His eyes narrowed as he clenched his fist. "Go take care of him!"

Ahmed nodded. He chambered a round in his pistol.

#

Blake threw three quick punches into Abir's kidneys. Abir screamed in pain. He threw his elbow back and connected to the side of Blake's head. Blake flew back across the small area between the cars. Abir reached for his knife. He leaped onto Blake, pinning his right arm with his left hand, and swung his knife in a stabbing motion towards Blake's face.

Blake used his arm defensively. The tip of the knife stopped short of Blake's left eye. Abir put his weight onto it and the blade moved closer. Blake turned his head to the right and the tip of the knife pierced the left side of his cheek.

The hatred emanating from Abir was palpable as both men struggled to gain the upper hand.

Blake struggled and freed his right arm. He delivered a devastating uppercut to Abir's jaw and then slammed Abir in the face three times with his right elbow with crushing blows. Blake pushed Abir over to the open window and slammed his right fist into the middle of Abir's chest and karate chopped him in the front of his neck. Abir reached for his throat.

Blake rained a flurry of blows to the side of Abir's head again with three more quick strikes with his elbow and then reached for Abir's calves and gasped ahold of them. He raised him to the window's ledge and threw him out. The train shuddered as the wheels crushed Abir beneath them.

Alice's voice came over the radio. "Blake, how ya doing? You've only got about two and a half minutes left until you reach the other tunnel."

Blake took three quick breaths. "I ran into a bit of trouble, but I'm good now."

"That's good. I have more bad news. We've got incoming. Satellite says it's an Israeli gun ship. It'll be there in three minutes."

"Fuck. It's gotta be Solomon."

Blake entered the second to last car and glanced at his timer.

2:18.

Motion in his peripheral alerted him. It was Ahmed, coming towards him from the last car. The passengers were still in shock and turned away from the battered-looking man in black military fatigues. Ahmed's arm went behind his back.

Blake let out his frustration. "Ah, shit. I don't have time for this."

Blake drew his suppressed Glock as Ahmed produced his own weapon. As the passengers began screaming, Blake pulled the trigger. Ahmed's head jerked back as the single round penetrated his skull.

Blake tried to calm them.

"Ich bin Polizei."

Some seemed to calm down, but for others, seeing a man shot to death was too much, and the screaming continued.

Blake stepped over Ahmed and exited the car. They had drawn the curtain over the window leading to the last car. Blake put his hand on the handle, paused a second, and then opened the door. Standing in front of him was the massive hulk of muscle, Kamal.

The man reached out and grabbed Blake. He pulled him in and threw him to the floor.

Blake rolled his eyes.

Not again.

Fallahi, dodged and darted to the other side of the train car. Blake rolled away from Kamal and got to his feet. He lunged forward and threw a hard right at Kamal's face, but the large man raised his hand and stopped Blake's hand cold. He twisted it outward and slammed Blake in the chest with his right hand, sending him back to the floor.

#

Zafar hadn't seen Abir in several minutes, so he worked his way back to the rear of the train to determine if he had taken care of the threat or not. Three cars from the rear, a conductor blocked his path to stop him. Zafar overheard other people talking about a man being shot. Zafar pulled his weapon and fired three rounds into the conductor's chest. Passengers screamed again, panic ensued, and they jammed the aisles as they scurried to get into the next car and away from Zafar.

#

On the ground, Blake shot a glance at his timer:

1:12.

Blake turned the beefy Iranian coming towards him. He was tired of being thrown around like a rag doll. He pulled his Glock, but Kamal kicked it out of his hand and sent it sliding across the hardwood floor and under one of the leather couches.

As the man kneeled to grab him, Blake pulled his leg back and kicked Kamal hard in the knee. The sound of bone cracking and sinew tearing filled Blake's ears as he followed through with his leg. The big man bent over in agony.

"You're still standing after that?"

Blake hopped to his feet and kned the former Takvaran commando in the face, knocking back his head and his arms out. Blake slammed the exposed Kamal through the door with a roundhouse kick to the chest.

He walked toward the door, reached for and grasped onto the doorframe and swung his legs forward, sending both of his feet into the chest of Kamal and slammed him into the far wall of the space between the cars.

Kamal swung his left fist at Blake and connected with the right side of Blake's jaw.

Blake's head spun to the left and when it did, Kamal reached out and grabbed him by the throat with both hands. Blake pulled his arms in to pry the former commando's beefy hands away, but they were too strong. Kamal was leaning back on the door to the other car to keep his weight off his bad knee. Blake continued to struggle. He was getting lightheaded.

#

Zafar hurried through the second to last car. Two men struggling in-between the cars. Zafar didn't know who they were, although he suspected one of them was the large guard he'd seen with Fallahi. He didn't care. His only goal was to complete his mission. Zafar raised his weapon and fired, but nothing happened. It was empty. He threw it to the floor and pulled out his pistol, raised it and fired.

#

The glass behind Kamal's head shattered. Blake assumed it busted from Kamal knocking his head back, but soon the grip around Blake's neck loosened. Kamal lowered his chin. A red splotch appeared. It spread like a colony of ant's after kicking their mound.

Kamal's eyes met Blake's. He released his grip and fell to the floor. The patch of blood continued to grow. Blake raised his head. A muzzle flash filled his vision. The bullet whizzed by Blake's head, shattering the door window behind him.

#

Solomon flew the armed gunship to the far side of the mountain, where the train would exit the tunnel and set the chopper to hover. She armed her missiles and flipped the red cover on top of the joystick to reveal the firing switch. The timer on the dash counted down.

"Thirty seconds and I send you to hell."

#

Blake ran into the last car and found Fallahi crouching in the corner. The light all around them went dark. They were in the tunnel.

"Okay, you wanna live?"

"Who are you?"

"I don't have time for this shit. You've got about thirty seconds to put on this backpack if you want to live."

"No, you go to hell!"

Kamal's dead body blocked the door from the next car. Zafar kicked at the door, trying to move the body. Despite the glass being shattered, the blind on the window in the opposing car was still down, blocking Zafar's view into the last car. Only for a moment, when the wind

blew, the blind revealed the contents of the car. He fired two pointless shots into the last car in desperation.

When the two bullets struck the bar, Blake had had enough. He grabbed Fallahi by the lapels and delivered a knock-out headbutt to his forehead.

Alice's voice came over the radio. "Blake. What are you doing? You have less than thirty seconds. That gunship is hovering on the other side of the tunnel."

Blake was putting the backpack on Fallahi. "I'm working on it. Just be at the other end of the tunnel."

He found the backpack's switch and turned it on. He dragged Fallahi over to the rear door and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Fuck! Nothing is ever easy!" He searched for his pistol.

"Blake! You've gotta hurry! Fifteen seconds!"

Blake dived for his pistol and reached under the seat to grab it. He stretched his arm as far as possible and got a finger on it.

"Blake! Ten seconds!"

Blake pulled the gun out, spun around and shot at the lock on the door three times. Zafar was still kicking at the opposite door, trying to get in.

"Seven seconds, Blake!"

Blake kicked open the door, grabbed Fallahi and threw him off the back of the train.

Precisely as Alice had said, the airbag deployed and surrounded the man in a cushion of air.

"Three seconds, Blake! You've gotta go now!"

The door busted open and Zafar stood at the other end of the car. Blake eyed Zafar as he raised his pistol towards Blake.

Blake saluted. "See ya later, asshole."

He jumped off the train backwards and deployed his cushion manually, but not before

smiling and giving Zafar the middle finger.

Blake and Fallahi both bounced and rolled and came to a stop a few meters from the end of the tunnel. Blake used his knife and cut his way out of the bubble.

#

The blood rushed to Zafar's face. His temples throbbed and his ire grew from deep within him. His prize getting farther and farther away.

Out of the tunnel, the light hurt his eyes, but only for a moment. The sound of a helicopter came from his left. He went to the window and moved the blind to observe the contrails of two sidewinder missiles as they rocketed towards him. His failure was now complete.

The two missiles slammed into the car and detonated with obliterating force. The explosion knocked Blake back. As the fireball expanded out, Blake grabbed the deflated cushion and pulled it over himself for protection.

The explosion caused the two cars nearest to the end to derail. The train applied its emergency brakes and came to a halt a kilometer away.

"Blake! Blake! Are you there?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Blake!"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"What about Fallahi?"

"Yup. Got him, too. Those ball things you made work great."

"I told you they would."

"They're fireproof too."

Alice smiled. "I know. Are—are you feeling okay? We're at the other end of the tunnel. You need to hurry."

"I'm feeling a little lightheaded. Someone knocked my brain around. I don't think we need to worry about the other train coming. This one's going to be blocking the tracks for a while."

“Right, but now this place is going to be swarming with emergency services. We gotta go. Now.”

“Well, send a couple of people to meet me halfway. I had to knock our buddy out, so I’ll have to carry him.”

“We’re on our way.”

#

Solomon sat in the pilot’s seat and waited for the smoke to clear. Seeing no movement, she was pleased she hit her target. She took the chopper out of hover and flew back out, over the Adriatic, where the Israeli ship was waiting for her.

#

Alice and one of the other crew members met Blake halfway and helped him carry Fallahi back into the chopper. On the way back to Vienna, Blake had time to reflect on Solomon and what she’d done to him. In the end, she was only doing her job; if the roles had been reversed, he’d have done the same thing to her. In a roundabout way, he forgave her. Besides, he would get her back sometime in the future.

#

The next day, Blake got a call from his handler, Mike Brennan.

“Blake. Great work. Fallahi’s in our custody. The Israelis think he’s dead, and you killed a bunch of terrorists. Not too bad for a couple of days’ work.”

“Too bad we couldn’t take out the rest of Ansar al-Sharia.”

“Well,” Mike cleared his throat, “funny you should say that.”

Chapter Thirteen

Al Abyar, Libya

03:18 (02:18 GMT)

August 5th

The Sirkorsky UH-60 Blackhawk flew low and silent at one hundred feet off the desert floor. The chill from the night air was refreshing as it rushed into the open door of the chopper. It was the same style of stealth helicopter used in the raid on Bin-Laden's compound. Blake had with him a handful of men he'd handpicked from SEAL team 3. Men he'd worked with before and trusted with his life.

Commander Calvin Douglas, the SEAL team leader; Lt. Commander Doc Gremore, medic; Lt. Derek Sanders, demolitions; Lt. Tyrone King, sniper; and Lt. James "Tonto" Kicking Bird, surveillance and technical expert.

Tonto had a direct feed from the surveillance satellite on his seven-inch tablet. From prior reports, intel showed there were seven men hiding in the small, two-story mud home, plus one dog. Blake couldn't have a dog given the lifestyle he led, but he loved dogs and insisted not to kill it. He had brought a small tranquilizer gun to knock it out for several hours. The house was located in the southeast corner of the city.

Mohamed Alzahabi, and his remaining splinter cell, abandoned their site in Benghazi. After Abir and Zafar's colossal failure at retrieving Fallahi, Mohamed had returned to his hometown of Al Abyar.

Known as 'Abyar,' it was a small village in the Marj District of Libya, fifty kilometers to the east of Benghazi and forty-two kilometers southwest of the city of Marj.

The stealth chopper landed in silence, one klick outside the village, in a barren part of the desert. Decked out in full assault gear, Blake and his team carried suppressed H&K MP 5 assault rifles, suppressed Glock 23's and the latest in night vision and communications equipment. The men's accouterment was lightweight since this was to be a fast in-and-out mission. They made the one klick run in less than four minutes.

They stopped and rested against an eight-foot mud wall. Tonto removed his tablet and

checked the satellite image. He pressed his throat mic. “Seven men total. All but one is asleep. One is on a couch in the main room where we’ll enter on the southwest side, and two more in a room on the northwest corner. Upstairs, there are two men in a bedroom in the northwest corner, and then one man in a bedroom in the northeast corner.”

Blake pointed at the figure on the tablet. “That’s Alzahabi. You said one was awake?”

“On the roof with a weapon, but it looks like he’s sitting with his back to the north wall. I can’t tell—wait—he moved his arm to scratch his face. He’s not asleep, but he’s not paying too much attention to what’s going on either.”

“What about the dog?”

“Let me pan over—yeah. Here he is. Sleeping outside the door on the southwest side.”

Blake tapped Tonto on the shoulder. “Can you pan around and try to identify an empty building high enough so Tyrone can get a bearing on our friend on the roof?”

“Already did. Three blocks west. Looks to be three or four stories. It’s empty. It’s a business or something.”

Blake turned to Tyrone. “Okay. Tyrone?”

Tyrone nodded and verified his destination with Tonto on the tablet.

“I’ll let you know when I’m in position.”

Blake nodded.

They sat and waited for Tyrone. Five minutes had passed when Tyrone came over the radio. “I’m in position. Target acquired. Over”

Blake glanced again at the glowing target on the tablet. “Roger. Hold fire. Over.”

“Roger. Holding fire. Over”

The home was located three blocks to the north. Blake motioned for them to proceed. Blake took point while Derek covered the rear. Another eight-foot-tall mud wall surrounded the house. There was a matching height iron gate across the entrance. With his back to the wall, Blake peeked around the corner. Through the gate, the German Shepherd was lying on the dirt ground next to an empty bowl. Blake unzipped his jacket pocket and withdrew a plastic bag containing a decent sized piece of meat.

Blake readied the meat. "Tyrone. We're in position. Fire when ready. Over."

Tyrone had made the necessary adjustments to his scope for distance and wind. It was an easy shot, not far with minimal wind. He put the target in his crosshairs, took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

"Threat eliminated. Over."

"Copy."

Blake leaned back around the corner and made a quiet ticking noise to get the dog's attention. The dog awoke and *woofed*. Blake held out the piece of meat and tossed it in the dog's direction.

The dog rose from his resting spot and scampered to the meat with his nose to the ground. He was thin and malnourished. He began to devour the meat as soon as he found it.

Blake turned back to his team. "I'm going to at least let him finish it. Poor thing looks starving."

Calvin smiled. "I can guarantee that's the best thing he's had to eat in months."

Blake nodded. "If ever."

Blake raised the tranquilizer gun while the dog ate the beef. Blake aimed and fired the dart into the dog's hindquarters when it finished eating. The dog made a slight yelp before it rolled over, unconscious.

Blake motioned for the team to proceed. Derek sprayed a can of lubricant on the gate's hinges to minimize squeaking. Blake tried the gate and found it unlocked. Once inside, they scurried in silence across the courtyard to the front door.

Tonto checked his tablet to ensure that no changes had occurred inside the house. Blake moved to the side as Derek applied lubricant to the door hinges. Derek was unsuccessful at opening the door. He reached inside his jacket pocket and retrieved an electronic door pick. Inserting it into the lock and pushing a button is all it took. He signaled Blake when it was done.

Blake turned back to Tonto for a status update.

Tonto raised his thumb. "We're good to go."

Blake positioned his night vision goggles, and with caution, opened the door. The night visions green hue laid out the orientation of the small house. To the right and through an opening was a small kitchen with a simple table and six chairs. Beyond was a stove with a pot resting on top.

To Blake's left was a couch facing him, against the far wall. Lying asleep on the couch was his first target. Leaning against the couch was an AK-47 and to the far left was a small table with an old television set with rabbit ears.

Blake raised his weapon, centered the red dot in the center of the man's head, and pulled the trigger. A quiet *whap* was the only sound made. The team used special ammo. They loaded the rounds into a polymer-based casing, which would reduce the sound by sixty percent when they hit the floor.

The other men had followed Blake into the house and covered him. After the first kill, they entered the next room. Calvin and Doc moved through the main room and came to a small hallway. They turned left and went into the bedroom where two men were sleeping on bed rolls. They each fired a single shot into a sleeping men's heads.

With caution, Blake and Derek climbed the old wood stairs, careful not to make it creak.

Calvin and Doc followed while Tonto stayed to keep an eye on the perimeter.

Blake and Derek turned right, towards Alzahabi's room. Calvin and Doc went left. Blake entered the doorway of Alzahabi's room and waited. Two quiet *whaps* signaled the last of Alzahabi's men were dead.

Blake stepped over to where Alzahabi was sleeping. He was the only one who had an actual bed.

Ingrained hostility filled Blake's eyes as he surveyed the man who laid before him.

He was asleep on his back with his arms crossed.

Howfitting.

He reached into his pocket and retrieved a glow stick. He snapped it with one hand and a warm orange glow filled the area he was standing. Blake raised his night vision and placed the glow stick on Alzahabi's chest. Blake took his left gloved hand and positioned it over the terrorist leader's mouth. He pointed the barrel of his suppressed Glock to the man's head.

With force, Blake pressed hard over Alzahabi's mouth. The cold steel barrel of his pistol pushed into the man's forehead.

Alzahabi's eyes opened wide with fear. Blake spoke to him in Arabic. "All of your men are dead. Don't make a noise. Do you understand?"

Alzahabi's eyes shifted over to look at Blake. He couldn't move his head from the force with which Blake was pressing down. He nodded.

"Do you understand English?"

Alzahabi nodded again.

"Good. I didn't give your other men the pleasure of seeing who sent them to hell, but I wanted you to know. I'm an American and I'm going to kill you. You—" Blake tapped the barrel of his Glock on Alzahabi's forehead twice, "—are a piece of shit."

Blake paused for a moment to take in the pleasure of seeing the fear on the man's face. He leaned in closer. His silhouette reflecting in the terrorist's soulless eyes.

"This is for Benghazi."

He squeezed the trigger.

END