

Chapter 51

After the “incident,” Darrin was in damage-control mode as he emerged from the base hospital with five stitches in the back of his head. If Jibril's family was as powerful as Bryant had indicated, this was going to be a disaster. Hopefully not an unmitigated one.

Johnny met him in front of the hospital. "Chappy, we've tucked Hennessey in for the night. Now you have about 40 sermons to give in the next 10 hours. You'll have to hold them to 5 minutes or so because there will be a lot of driving between encampments. Private McAllister here will be our driver."

Darrin and Johnny ministered to 42 different units – the same sermon. They prayed with the men. They collected a lot of letters that the men wanted given to their families if something happened to them.

The Army had been predicting at least a 30 percent casualty rate, which would go much higher if Iraqi resistance was fierce or if chemical weapons were used. There had been some talk that the Iraqis had practice fired some Scuds with chemical warheads near King Khalid Military City in the preceding weeks. Darrin hadn't seen anything, but one of their drivers claimed he did. Hennessey seemed a little upset about it.

The War was over in less than 100 hours. The 1st I.D. had led the assault through the center of the Iraqi defense lines. There was not a single casualty among the troops Darrin had spoken with. At least not any physical casualties. The ease with which they had defeated the Iraqis troubled a lot of the men. The 1st I.D. had captured about 2,000 Iraqi prisoners, but as many more had been buried alive in trenches overrun by the armored bulldozers sent in by the Mechanized units. Darrin had seen arms and legs sticking out of the ground as he and Johnny traveled behind the vanguard with a supply unit.

The units of the 1st I.D. stopped their advance deep into Iraqi territory. They were prepared to go all the way to Baghdad, but they would go no further than Safir, where they would set up security for the surrender talks.

Darrin and Johnny spent a couple of days visiting the units encamped around Safir. Darrin was so happy that nobody under his care had been hurt, he had nearly forgotten about the incident with Hennessey. He was quickly reminded when he was called to a meeting with Major General Robinson, the head of the 1st I.D.

“Sir, this is Chaplain Captain Allis,” Major Cisneros, Robinson’s aide-de-camp, said, introducing Darrin to the General.

“Have a seat, son. It looks like we have a situation with one of your men, Private Hennessey,” the General began fairly calmly.

“Yes, sir,” Darrin replied.

“You may not be able to see it from where you’re sitting, son, but I am bleeding out of my ass over here.”

“Sir?” Darrin asked.

“I just got out of a meeting with General Schwarzkopf about what your boy Hennessey did – plundering Saudi artifacts of some kind – and the General ripped me a new asshole. So I’m asking you if you see me bleeding from over there.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Darrin replied.

“Let me explain something to you, son. We just put hundreds of thousands of troops in harm’s way to protect the Saudi Kingdom and liberate Kuwait. That should buy us a lot of love from these,” the General paused, catching himself, “the good people of these lands. But instead,

we've got the Commander of the Saudi Royal Army asking us to turn over some buck private for execution."

"I understand sir," Darrin said.

"We have the fate of the world in our hands here negotiating the end of this conflict and you boys are fiddle fartin' around with Saudi antiques?"

Darrin was tempted to say "Ottoman antiquities" but he knew he needed to sit there and take his punishment. It later occurred to Darrin that Major General Robinson was close to right about one thing - the fate of the world had been in Darrin's hands before Hennessey burned it.

"I apologize for that sir. I take full responsibility," Darrin said.

The General turned red faster than a stoplight in West Hollywood. "You better God damn believe it's your responsibility mister," he shouted. "You wouldn't be sitting here if this weren't your responsibility. You think I asked you here to do me a God damned favor, son? You think I'm the one who screwed this up?"

Major Cisneros tried to interrupt, "Sir, remember he's a chaplain."

"I don't God damn care if he's the God damned pope or Jesus Christ himself for that matter. I've got a big God damned problem here because somebody didn't do their God damned job," Robinson shouted. He then took a deep breath.

"You've got another enlisted man working there with you, a Sergeant Duran, correct?"

"That's correct," Darrin replied.

"And he's got 15 years in?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, it's going to be a real shame for him too. Let me tell you what's going to happen, son. If you don't get your ass back to KKMC and fix this, not only will you and Hennessey be

bounced, but so will Duran. All of you will be done in this Army. And if we get Hennessey out of this country alive, he will spend the next 10 years at Leavenworth. Do you hear me?"

Robinson asked.

"Yes sir," Darrin replied.

"You're dismissed," Robinson said, still glaring at Darrin.

As he exited the tent, Darrin saw Johnny standing a few feet away. He looked like he was in shock.

"I guess you heard that?" Darrin asked.

"Yeah, sound travels well out here in the desert. Especially at that many decibels," Johnny said. "I got an Army pension coming to me Chappy. I'll lose that if I get a dishonorable discharge. What has Hennessey done to us here?"

* * *

"So what was the fallout from this incident? Barrett asked.

"Hennessey got discharged from the Army. It was all downhill for him from there."

"What happened to him?" Choi asked.

"Well, he died," Darrin responded.

"I know, but before that. What happened to him during those two years from when Hennessey was discharged from the Army until he committed suicide?"

"He never really recovered from what happened," Darrin said, looking down.

Chapter 52

After the incident with Jibril was resolved, all three of them – Darrin, Johnny, and Hennessey -- were sent back to Ft. Riley early as a precautionary measure. When they got back, they all agreed not to talk to anybody about what really happened. At least not until they had done more research into validating the contents of the manuscript.

“I want to run this by Bryant, too,” Darrin said.

Johnny kind of raised his eyebrows in a “good luck” sort of way.

“You know, the dates and things in the scroll could be true without everything else being true,” Johnny suggested.

“Or, the curse could be true without the contents being true,” Hennessey maintained.

“Tell me you didn't feel it too Sarge when Chappy was reading the scroll to us back there in Saudi.”

“Feel what?” Johnny asked.

“Like a hand was reaching out toward you and grabbing you deep inside your soul,” Hennessey said.

Johnny didn't say anything.

“You felt it didn't you?” Hennessey pressed.

“The only thing I felt was lunch from the mess hall earlier in the day. I'm not some old woman who believes in curses,” Johnny replied unconvincingly.

“How 'bout you Chappy?” Hennessey asked. “You were looking like death warmed over by the end of that week of reading the scroll.”

“Just words on a page, Hennessey,” Darrin said, trying to reassure everyone. “Just words on a page.”

"You don't believe that, Chappy. You felt it too!" Hennessey said.

"Look, we were in the run up to the biggest war of our generation. Everybody was on edge. Don't confuse that with something mystical, Private," Darrin replied.

Hennessey nodded his head up and down slowly, appearing satisfied that he was right. "O.k., I get it," he said.

"Hennessey, you shouldn't have destroyed it," Johnny scolded. "It didn't belong to you. You almost got turned over to the Saudis for a beheading. You were stupid. You could have gotten all of us kicked out of the Army. Chappy had to put his ass on the line for all of us."

"Sorry. I couldn't stand there and listen to that stuff about us getting attacked. And I saw the look on Jibril's face. It was like pride he had that these guys who fought the Russians would come after us. No, I wasn't going to stand for that," Hennessey explained.

Hennessey still got his discharge papers three weeks later. Darrin spent the better part of two of those weeks convincing his superior officers not to make the discharge a "dishonorable one."

"Well, plundering host country artifacts would ordinarily result in a dishonorable," Major Oliphant from the 1st I.D. Personnel unit told Darrin. "Unless you can certify they weren't host country artifacts," he said with a wink.

Darrin thought about it. The manuscript had come from the Ottoman Empire. It made sense, because the Apostle John would have died in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. This wasn't a Saudi artifact -- not technically. It had been brought from Turkey -- and the passage of 90 years didn't somehow turn it into a Saudi artifact from a Turkish one.

"O.k., I can certify to that," Darrin said.

"Fine. We'll call it a medical discharge. The guy is obviously a little unhinged."

With that, Oliphant pulled out a rubber stamp, inked it up, pounded it down on five different copies of the same paper, and they were done.

It was a small consolation to Hennessey. “What do I do now Chappy? I wanted to be a soldier. I never thought about a different career. I don’t know where to start.”

“Open the newspaper and go on some interviews. Tell them you served when your country called. It’s the truth,” Darrin replied.

“I don’t know if I’m strong enough to go back there. I’ve got a lot of history in Brooklyn.”

“Can’t be any harder than the Army, Hennessey,” Darrin said.

Darrin was wrong. Hennessey had a hard time finding and keeping a job. The country was in an economic downturn. His Gulf War service did help get Hennessey into a number of decent jobs, but it didn’t keep him there.

Chapter 53

“Check,” Rod said, looking at a flop of three cards – a king, and an offsuit seven and two. He had pair of kings as his hole cards, giving him three of a kind and command of the rest of the hand. He could have immediately raised and scared the crap out of everyone else, causing them to fold. But with raises limited in this version of Texas Hold ‘Em, Rod was better off coaxing more chips out of the other players a little at a time. Then lower the hammer.

“Check,” said Mitch Spencer, Rod’s investment broker, and another one of the Wednesday night regulars.

“Hey Rod, how’s Darrin doing?” Scott Greenbaum asked.

“Fine. I think he's been hooking up with Tina's friend, Stacy.”

“Wow, nice catch. She seems out of his league, though. Raise,” said Dr. Greenbaum.

That’s right, take the cookies Santa, Rod thought.

“How so?” Rod asked. “Raise.”

“Wasn't she dating that studio honcho, Bronstein or something?” Scott asked.

“Yeah. He decided he wanted to go back to his wife. They've got a kid or something,” Rod replied.

“Well, I'm just saying that, an entertainment V.P. here,” Scott said holding his left hand flat above his head, “and Darrin here,” holding his right hand flat and lower.

“You're crazy, Scott. Darrin’s self-directing a brokerage account with over five . . .,” Mitch said, stopping himself. “Fold,” he said, tossing his cards in.

Rod shot Mitch a nasty look.

“Five? Five what?” Dr. Greenbaum asked.

“Nothing,” Mitch replied, embarrassed. “I can't talk about that. But I can tell you he is a very savvy investor. You might say he's a contrarian. But he's always right. It's uncanny.”

Scott Greenbaum looked at Rod and then back at Mitch. Both were trying to keep poker faces.

“Guess you can't judge a book by its cover,” Scott said, going back to his cards. “Raise,” he said, walking right into Rod's carefully laid trap and an inevitable loss of \$150 on the hand.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 54

Jibril knocked four times on the front door of the cookie-cutter house nestled in the back of a quiet housing development in Orange County's Rancho Santa Margarita. It was after dark, but he was sure he had the correct address. It had been a long drive from San Diego, and he was anxious to relieve his bladder.

Ibrahim had done well, Jibril thought to himself. The house was a perfect place to stage their operation. Jibril had spent a lot of time in the stop and go traffic looking at the Orange County and Los Angeles maps. The house was close enough to Los Angeles, but not too close.

The door opened a crack. The man inside smiled and let Jibril in.

"Hello, my brother," Jibril said to Ibrahim after he closed the door behind him.

They hadn't seen each other for over a year since Damascus. They kissed each other on both cheeks.

"You look well. How is the sheik?" Ibrahim asked, referring to Jibril's older brother, Osama.

"God is strengthening him. Our work will revive him. I am sure of it."

"Yes, God willing."

"Tell me of the preparations," Jibril ordered, wasting no time.

"They are in place."

"And the one God sent to help us – Darrin Allis?" Jibril asked.

"We are watching him. It appears that he is fond of the company of a certain woman."

"Really? A whore no doubt," Jibril said confidently.

"No doubt," Ibrahim laughed.

"Will we be able to use her?"

“Probably. We need to catch her first though.”

“That shouldn’t be hard.”

“No. Of course not.” *As long as I can get some help that is a little more competent,*
Ibrahim thought.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 55

It was a wrenching couple of years for Hennessey and Darrin after the Gulf War. Darrin was trying to salvage his marriage. Becky hadn't done so well with her husband gone for six months. She ended up going back to Muncie around Christmas time and had stayed with her parents.

Darrin returned a hero to the congregation at First Bible Baptist Church in Muncie. Pastor Chuck ended up letting him speak at all three morning services.

"Sure you can handle three sermons, son?" Chuck Cooper asked.

"Yeah, my record is 42 in a day," he replied

Pastor Chuck and Darrin were sitting watching the baseball game that afternoon when his father-in-law started one of his patented heart-to-heart talks.

"Darrin, I want you to know I'm proud of what you did there in Iraq with the troops. I've been doing a lot of thinking about that the last several months."

"Thanks Chuck, that's nice of you to say."

"But you know, I did my part here too with Becky," Cooper added.

"Well I really appreciate you and Rhonda letting her stay here. I know it must have been lonely for her back at Ft. Riley."

"Darrin, I figured Becky wasn't going to tell you. But the Bible says you're the head of your house and you need to know something," his father-in-law said.

Darrin knew this wasn't going to be something he really wanted to hear. "O.k., go ahead."

"The reason Becky came back to Muncie is because we drove all the way to Kansas and got her."

Darrin grimaced.

Chuck Cooper continued. “She had been driving drunk. She went off the road and hit a tree. Fortunately, she was only going about 15 mph. The police arrested her and put in jail for the weekend. We went and bailed her out.”

“No, she didn’t tell me about that.”

“Darrin, there's something else. There was a man in the car with her according to the police report.”

“How did you see the police report?”

“We wouldn't have even known about that part if the insurance company hadn't been giving her a hard time about repairing the car. They were all over her because they were afraid this guy was going to sue. She swears she was just giving the guy a ride home from a bar near Ft. Riley like she was being a Good Samaritan or something,” Pastor Chuck said, his voice showing both skepticism and anger. “Anyway, the insurance company gave the guy \$2,500 for a signed release of all claims. They notified Becky the next day that her insurance was being dropped.”

Darrin closed his eyes and shook his head back and forth slowly.

“It hasn't been easy the last 6 months, Darrin. We've kept a close eye on her, but I think she's still sneaking booze. She spends a lot of time with a couple of her high school friends – Tammy Brock and Dawn Mills. Tammy is Methodist and I think Dawn is into some new age crystals or pyramids or something. I think they're both big drinkers, and they're not helping Becky much,” Cooper added.

Like many parents, Chuck Cooper had a blind spot when it came to his daughter. In fact, Dawn didn't drink -- she was a health food nut and smoked marijuana. Tammy was the type of

person who only had an occasional wine cooler -- at least until Becky came back to Muncie and introduced her to Double Jack and Cokes (two shots of Jack Daniels Tennessee Whiskey, topped off by Regular Coca-Cola).

Darrin waited for the “I told you so” from Pastor Chuck, but it never came. Just a hand on his shoulder and a very apologetic look.

“She loves you Darrin. We never let her grow up, I guess. She went straight from being here in our home to marrying you. It’s like she’s having her teenage rebellion. We weren’t going write to you and tell you this when you had everything on your mind like that.”

Darrin had counseled dozens of men about alcohol abuse. It was often a physical addiction that needed to be dealt with medically. But most times there was also an underlying problem that needed to be dealt with – usually despair. It was a fear of reality and the pain associated with it. The bottle permitted escape. But the price was higher than the relief it provided. The problems were still there when you sobered up. Only they were now worse because in addition to everything else, you were an alcoholic.

Sometimes people could go through college drunk. It was a right of passage. Sometimes they just needed to wake up in a bathtub with their clothes on and vomit down the front of them to realize that drinking to excess was not good for them.

It wasn’t clear to Darrin which stage Becky was in. She was glad to have Darrin home - and was proud of him. But she was more reserved with him. Not her old self. He thought after a couple of weeks she would warm up, but it didn’t happen.

“Beck, what’s going on?” Darrin asked one day. “I’m home now. I’m going to be home. We can go back to the way we were.”

“That’s the problem, D, I don’t want to go back to that.”

“What do you mean?” Darrin said in a way that showed he was hurt.

“I mean, I can't go on living like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like being poor and lonely all the time.”

“What do you mean, it isn't that bad,” he said defensively.

“It is that bad. I saw it once I moved back to Muncie for a while. These people are living real lives -- buying houses, and cars, and having kids. We're sitting here in rental housing on an Army base with an old Chevy Cavalier,” Becky said.

“Beck, you're a preacher's kid. Don't tell me you didn't know what you were getting into when we got married.”

“Which is another thing - we got married when we were 19 years old, D. What were we thinking?”

“We were thinking we wanted to be living together and getting married was the only way your Dad was going to allow that AND pay for your schooling.”

“It was stupid, D.”

“I don't disagree with that,” he said.

“You don't disagree? You don't disagree? That's the other problem. You can sit there and think about things in ways that makes sense to you and not to me. I don't understand half the stuff you say anymore. It only makes me feel lonelier.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't say you're sorry. It's the way you are. It's what you grew into in the last eight years we've been married.”

“So what are you saying Beck?”

“I’m saying I’ve grown too – but differently than you. I don’t think I feel the same way about you.”

Ouch, he thought. Felt a lot like rejection. He started to get angry.

“Becky, is there somebody else? Are you cheating on me?” he asked.

“No! How could you say that! No!” she said, denying it.

“I was just wondering because I know you got busted for drunk driving and there was a guy in the car with you and that you two had been at the bar together.”

Becky’s pale face became flushed, almost matching her red hair. “How? Dad told you didn’t he?”

“Doesn’t matter. What do we do now?”

“I need something D. I need a reason to live my life,” she said. “I want to have a career. I want to do something that I can be proud of myself. Not just being your wife, but something for me. Something I did.”

“O.k. Sounds like you’ve been thinking about this. What is it you want?”

“I want to go back to school. I want to grow out of this trap I’m in. I want to become a nurse. I want to help people.”

“Then that’s what you should do. But you need to deal with the drinking problem too.”

He expected denial from her. He didn’t get it.

“I know,” she said.

It wasn’t easy for her, but Becky went back to school part-time to become a nurse. She also worked part-time at a nursing home to help pay for tuition. Between school and studying and work, she was busy seven days a week. She also attended AA meetings. She had a couple of minor relapses, but stayed sober the rest of the time she and Darrin were married.

Chapter 56

Darrin had Becky's issues to deal with after returning from Saudi Arabia. Then he tried to take on Hennessey's too. Darrin was as supportive as possible, but he knew he couldn't live Hennessey's life for him. The low point was when Hennessey was arrested on a drug possession charge – cocaine, his old nemesis. His lawyer, Gus McCracken, asked Darrin for an affidavit about Hennessey's service in the Army. Hennessey ended up getting probation and court-ordered rehab.

A few weeks later, in February 1993, McCracken called Darrin out of the blue. "Chaplain Allis, how are you doing today? I was hoping I could get your help with something. I'm working on getting Sean Hennessey some disability benefits from the Army."

"Disability?" Darrin asked. "For what?"

"For the Iraqi chemical weapons that were used on him during the Gulf War."

"I don't think . . .," Darrin began.

"No, no, please hear me out. You were riding together in a Humvee with Sean and Johnny Duran and a supply sergeant and the supply sergeant saw a brown cloud."

"There were sandstorms all the time out there, but"

"Please, let me finish. This was a different type of brown cloud. It might interest you to know that the French and the Czech units who were near King Khalid Military City measured high levels of mustard gas before the ground war started."

"Look, I don't know how I can help," Darrin replied.

"I need an affidavit from you about brown cloud and the possibility it hurt Sean. Not a medical conclusion of course. But just something saying you saw it."

"But I didn't see it," Darrin insisted.

“I think you did see it. You just don’t remember. Other things happened there that you don’t remember either. Isn’t that right, Chaplain? Things that you agreed you wouldn’t talk about?”

He knows, Darrin thought to himself. *Hennessey told him.*

“I need to think about this,” Darrin said. He felt himself getting warm.

“Fine. Take your time. Your help is very important. Even if, hypothetically, there were no brown cloud, Sean dealt with something in the Saudi desert that made him sick. And he was serving in the Army when it happened. He didn’t ask for it. And the Army should compensate him. Do you understand Chaplain?”

“I understand what you are saying.”

Darrin hung up the phone gently so as to not let Lawyer McCracken know he was upset. Darrin counted to five, and then snatched the entire phone up, yanked the cord out of the wall, and smashed it on the floor in front of him. He hadn’t felt this type of anger before.

“What the hell are you doing to me, Hennessey?” he screamed to his empty office.

“You’re a piece of shit! God damn loser! What have you done?”

He hadn’t used language like that before. He had thought it. More and more lately, in fact. But he never said it. He felt more alone than he ever had in his life. He started to cry.

“I’m sorry, Lord. If you’re really there, I’m . . . , I’m just really sorry.” He cried for another half an hour. But he didn’t feel any better when he was done.

There was no answer at Hennessey’s apartment that weekend when Darrin called. He finally got through to him late Monday morning.

“Hennessey, what’s going on?” Darrin said tersely.

“Oh, the lawyer called you I guess,” Hennessey replied meekly.

“Yeah, he did. We agreed on this. You broke our agreement, Hennessey.”

“I know, I know. But I have no money to live on, Chappy. I can't hold down a job. It's what happened over there Chappy. He said he was signing up clients who have Gulf War Syndrome. He thinks that's what happened to me. I got gassed.”

“What happened to you Hennessey was that you thought you knew better. You were only a Private, but you knew better. Better than your commanding officer. Better than Johnny. And then, I went to bat for you. And you let me down. You're like a baby - a 23-year-old baby. You can't take responsibility. And you're lazy as hell, too. Life's a hard thing Hennessey. It's hard work. But you get up in the morning and you get your ass out of bed and go the hell to work. And then you work an eight hour day like you're getting paid for it. Not fooling around - working. So there it is – that is how you make a living. Any more questions?”

There was silence.

“I know you must be pretty mad to cuss me like that Chappy,” Hennessey replied, childlike.

“You better believe I'm mad. We don't need anybody else in the loop on this thing. We are waiting and seeing what happens. Not talking,” Darrin snapped. “And do you know why?”

“Why?” Hennessey asked.

“Because you were right Hennessey. You were right about what you said two years ago when we got back here to Ft. Riley. That scroll did reach out and grab me. I did feel it. Johnny felt it too. He told me about it later.”

“Why didn't you guys just say something, Chappy. You made me feel like I was crazy or something.”

“I’m sorry, Hennessey. I’m sorry. My life is a wreck – my marriage is going to hell. And you’ve gotten messed up on drugs. Johnny’s totally devastated – Glory, just had a miscarriage four months into her pregnancy. They were going to have a little boy. I never should’ve told you guys what the scroll said.”

“We made a choice Chappy. You didn’t lie to us. You laid it out there,” Hennessey said. “And it’s o.k. anyway on this lawsuit.”

“What’s o.k.?” Darrin asked.

“There’s not going to be a lawsuit,” Hennessey replied.

“Why not?”

“No lawyer anymore. I went to his office this morning to talk about the case, and there was yellow police tape up all over and cops standing around. My lawyer was shot to death last night, Chappy.”

“Who? How?”

“They think it was a drug client of his. They found cocaine on his office floor, like someone dropped a bag of it on the way out. Maybe he was holding drugs for some clients. The cops don’t seem real interested in the whys and hows. McCracken was a defense lawyer who represented drug dealers and now he’s dead. The cops are satisfied,” Hennessey said.

“What did you tell him, Hennessey?” Darrin asked.

“Doesn’t matter now. I have got to go Chappy. Stuff to do today. I’m sorry. I know I let you down.”

It was the last time Darrin spoke to Sean Hennessey. The World Trade Center was bombed an hour-and-a-half later. And Hennessey sent Darrin an email that night -- just before he went off his balcony.

* * *

“It was drugs,” Darrin said, looking up at Barrett and Choi, his eyes watering. “He couldn’t get over what happened in Saudi, and he turned to drugs. He had a problem with them for a long time. They found cocaine in his system when they did the autopsy.”

Well, at least this guy seems to have a soul, Choi thought to himself as he looked at Darrin. *Yes, might just be enough there to work with after all.*

“O.k., well we're going to step out for a minute and talk about whether we think it's going to be safe for you to leave or whether we want to think about some other alternatives,” Barrett said. *Like a little cot in the holding cell down the hall,* Barrett thought.

Barrett and Choi stepped out of Interrogation 3 and walked up the hall to the "Observation Room." Barrett knew he had to say something.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 57

“Carl, this was always the plan,” Director Moran said, his voice rising. “We're not going to screw around with this.”

“And I'm saying we shouldn't screw around either,” Barrett shot back. “Why take a chance here on letting him loose?”

“Look, we've got enough chatter going on out there that we know something is coming. Now if we just grab this guy and Jibril can't find him, how's that going to work out? Jibril will know that we're on to him. No, our goal is to stop this attack, not just delay it,” Moran said.

“He's right, Carl,” Agent Randi Socia interrupted.

“Shut up, Randi! We all know why you got the lead on this case,” Barrett snapped.

“Why's that? Because you're too much of a drunk to keep your shit together, Carl?” Socia said, giving back as good as she got. “Maybe they had to turn to some 'broad' because your brain is so pickled from booze.”

“Enough!” Moran bellowed. He looked over at Assistant U.S. Attorney Garza, who just grinned and shrugged.

“But how do you know that he isn't just going to tell Jibril?” Agent Choi asked, trying to half-heartedly back up his partner.

“Because while he's been here tonight, we've had a team searching his apartment. We're tapping his phone. We're going to follow him everywhere he goes. He is going to lead us to Jibril,” Moran replied.

Barrett thought about arguing further. Wasn't going to do much good. *Moran's a stubborn bastard who won't change his mind even if he knows he wrong*, he thought. And this was a close judgment call.

“O.k. Fine. Turn him loose. But there is going to be a big ‘I told you so’ coming,”

Barrett said.

Barrett and Choi exited the Observation Room and walked back down the hall.

“Next time, jump in a little sooner, o.k.?” Barrett said to Choi.

“Right,” Choi replied.

They re-entered Interrogation Room 3.

“Darrin, thank you for talking to us this evening. We’re going to give you our cards. If you hear or see anything out of the ordinary, please call one of us immediately,” Choi said.

“O.k., thanks.”

“Darrin, is there anything else you can tell us that you think might help us here?” Barrett asked.

“No, I don't really have anything else.”

“O.k., well thanks Darrin for coming in this evening, we know it's getting late,” Choi said, trying to rush things along before his partner got into more trouble.

“Sure, no problem,” Darrin said, starting for the door.

“Oh, Darrin, I was wondering about something,” Barrett said, Lt. Columbo-like. *Time for the Hail Mary*, Barrett thought. He hadn't been to Mass since he was a kid, but the imagery still stuck with him. *Help me Mother Mary*.

“Yes,” he said, turning to Barrett.

“When you were at Ft. Riley, did you ever remember meeting Tim McVeigh?”

Darrin's eyebrows raised for a moment and his face fell.

* * *

“Chappy, I know you have a lot going on trying to get my butt out of a sling here, but if you could maybe talk to this McVeigh kid I was telling you about, I think it would help,”

Hennessey said.

Darrin brushed him off, saying, “A lot of guys have problems Private, and yours is the one I need to focus on right now. If I don’t fix this, your head is going to be mounted and stuffed on some rich sheik’s wall.”

Darrin was rifling through his procedure manuals trying to figure out how to make a call to Stu Weinberg, who had returned stateside a couple of days before. He had to get the dates translated quickly.

“I know, I know, Chappy. But this guy told me he blew the head off some Iraqi who was trying to surrender. I think it's really gonna screw him up.”

“Fine, I'll give him a visit. Set something up.”

The meeting never happened. Darrin felt a little bad at the time, but he felt worse about a lot of other things.

He never thought about Timothy McVeigh again until that April day in 1994 when he saw McVeigh’s name and picture splashed all over the television screen in connection with the Oklahoma City bombing. More guilt. Hennessey was right. It was good Hennessey hadn’t lived to see it.

Darrin replayed it over and over in his mind. He doubted anything he could have done would have made a difference. But he regretted it. He regretted not intervening. That sometimes bothered him more than any of the rest. That horror was not destined. At least not in the scroll.

* * *

“What the hell are you doing Carl?” yelled Moran at the monitor in the Observation Room.

~ ~ ~

Ron Choi knew his partner had really fouled up, but he kept his eyes on Darrin to catch the reaction.

"It's my understanding that Tim McVeigh was raised a Catholic. We had both Catholic and Protestant chaplains in the 1st Infantry. Tim McVeigh probably would have sought out a Catholic chaplain," Darrin said.

Choi didn't sense hesitation in Darrin's response. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He answered it so quickly and succinctly that it sounded rehearsed. Kind of like those politicians who have practiced their "talking points."

Choi jumped in, "Oh, that's interesting. O.k. Darrin, can I give you a ride back to work or wherever?"

"Well, my bike is at work. It's kind of late to ride home now. If you wouldn't mind stopping there first, maybe I could throw it in the trunk and you could drop me off at home? Otherwise, you could drop me off at home, but I'll have to try to catch a ride to work in the morning."

Fine, let Choi be your taxi driver, Barrett thought. I would have tucked you in right here tonight.

Chapter 58

“So what do you think, Manny?” Director Moran asked Asst. U.S. Attorney Garza.

“We’ve got probable cause to search his financial and phone records, right?”

“Links to an al Qaeda leader. He’s able to afford living in Brentwood while working in a soup kitchen. And he had to have money to travel. It’s coming from somewhere. Let’s go ahead and do the whole thing, tax returns too. Who knows, maybe that’s where we get him,” Garza said.

“Like Al Capone,” said Agent Socia, referring to how the FBI had brought down Al Capone and several key Mafia figures since then – income tax evasion.

“Run it through SWIFT too,” suggested Garza, referring to the Federal government’s once secret method of tracking money transfers in and out of the United States. The Bush Administration went “ballistic” after the program was leaked to several major U.S. newspapers.

“Any email traffic would be critical too. Did they see a computer when they were searching his apartment tonight?” Garza asked

“No,” responded Agent Socia. “I just spoke to the team a couple of minutes ago. Nothing.”

“That’s kind of odd, isn’t it?” asked Director Moran.

“Sort of,” said Socia, “except that we’re seeing a lot more use of Internet cafés by terror cell members. Things are a much more difficult to trace. But we’ll check to see if he has an account with one of the Internet service providers.”

“A hard drive would have been a lot easier to check,” said Garza.

“There might still be a computer somewhere. It’s always possible he knew we were coming and tidied up,” said Agent Robles.

“Luis is right. Cecil, ask his friend, Warner, if he’s holding anything that belongs to Darrin Allis,” instructed Moran.

“I’ll add it to my list Chief,” said Agent Hogue.

“Hey Manny,” Director Moran said.

“Yeah?” Garza replied.

“Make sure you tell Davis this guy works for Althea Thompson,” Moran said grinning. Now it was his turn to get into Garza’s shit. U.S. Attorney Davis Northern was Garza’s boss.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. As in Michael Thompson’s wife, Althea?” Garza asked. Davis Northern had been Michael Thompson’s protégé – but it was well known he was never one of Althea Thompson’s favorites.

“The same,” Moran replied.

“Everything by the numbers. O.k. Jimmy?” Garza confirmed.

“That’s why you’re here Manny,” Moran said.

Chapter 59

Choi pulled the blue Crown Victoria up in front of the Pico Avenue Assistance Center.

“Can I help you with your bike?”

“No, thanks, I’ve got it. Can I throw it in the trunk?”

“Oh, yeah. Let me move some stuff first.” Choi hadn’t been thinking about the fact he would need to move a small arsenal from the trunk up to the front seat. Not exactly FBI protocol. He was done though by the time Darrin came back out.

“Is this all?” Choi asked.

“Yeah, just the bike.” Darrin decided he would leave the more sensitive “items” in his work locker. “Here’s a piece of rope that we can use to keep the trunk lid down. My boss gives me a ride home sometimes when I work late, so I’m used to tossing my bike in the trunk. Sometimes it doesn’t always fit.”

It was after 10 p.m. and it took only a few minutes to get from Pico Avenue to Darrin’s apartment. Before letting Darrin out of the car, Agent Choi looked around to double-check that the FBI team sent out earlier was gone.

“O.k., well thanks a lot for your help Darrin. You’ve got my card. I really want you to call me if you hear anything or see anything out of the ordinary. This is an ongoing investigation, so if you could treat what we told you as confidential I would appreciate it. And we may have more questions over the next few days,” added Choi. *That was an understatement,* he thought.

“Sure, anything I can do to help.” *As long as you don’t try to stop things,* he thought to himself as Choi drove off. Darrin Allis knew he was playing a very dangerous game.

He walked past his neighbor's apartment, expecting to hear the pug. Hmm, Eric must be home. The pug only barked when Eric was gone.

He opened his apartment door and turned on the lights. At first glance, things looked like they were in order. He walked over and looked at the door to his bedroom. He had used two very tiny pieces of tape to attach one of his blond hairs to both sides of the slightly opened bedroom door. The hair was broken. Same thing with the door to the bathroom. He had figured the FBI would probably stop by. That meant the place might be wired as well.

What a day, he thought to himself. But the interview had gone a lot better than he had expected. He thought his answers were pretty good. He was surprised they were focusing on Jibril at this point. And that they were worried Jibril was going to hurt him.

He felt a little uncomfortable leaving his gun at the Assistance Center, even though it was hidden away there. The gun was kind of a security blanket for him. And also a way for him to think about how he could escape this thing that had swallowed his life.

It was an Army-issue, .45 caliber pistol. His dad had somehow been able to keep it when he left the Army in the 1950s. He had hidden it way for over 30 years and had given it to Darrin as a gift when he decided to join the Army.

“Here, son. This kept me safe when I was in the service. Of course, the only times I came close to using it was when I was officer of the day and had to go around patrolling the bars near the base in Heidelberg. It wouldn't have done much good if the Russians had invaded West Germany.”

It was probably the most sentimental gift Darrin had ever gotten from his father. Of course, he wasn't supposed to carry it as a chaplain. And he didn't. But he did keep it in his footlocker.

He would sit on his sofa at night and pass the gun back and forth from hand to hand – like someone might do with a baseball – while watching reruns of Happy Days, Good Times, All in the Family, and the Fresh Prince. Until earlier that week he had a special place for it next to the cushion on the far right end of the sofa. The sofa pulled out to a queen bed, so there was a metal frame there that the gun rested on nicely. It was far enough down though that you couldn't see it unless you were reaching down to find loose change in the sofa or something.

He knew what the .45 felt like pressed against his right temple. Hard. Cold. Unforgiving. It felt the same way pressed against his chest. And he knew what it tasted like too. Metal and oil. With a slight smell of gunpowder from the barrel.

The gun was a way out. He had nearly pulled the trigger several times over the years, most recently about six weeks earlier. Then he went to the anniversary party for Rod and Tina. And he found what he hoped was a better way out – Stacy.

Chapter 60

Agent Barrett tried to look nonchalant as he walked past the open door to the Observation Room. He heard Moran's voice inside, "Was that Barrett? Carl! Carl! Get back here!"

"You bellowed Jimmy?" Barrett asked as he poked his head around the open door.

Moran looked really pissed this time. "Let's talk in my office. I'll be there in a minute."

* * *

Carl Barrett had joined the FBI after returning from Vietnam. He was in Army Intelligence and participated in some of the Army's covert operations in Cambodia and Laos. He thought he knew right from wrong. He thought he had a pretty good internal compass. But some of that stuff, what they did over there, it just didn't make much sense.

Barrett felt like the Bureau helped him get back on track that way. It was pretty easy telling who the bad guys were. And he was one of the good guys. He settled into the financial crimes unit for over twenty years. He never ceased to be amazed at the ways people would come up with for ripping other people off.

But he worked too hard. There was so much to do, and not enough manpower to do it. And no matter how many criminals you put away, it seemed like there were always two more to take their places.

Barrett had met and married a school teacher when he was in his late thirties. Patricia Price Barrett was a stereotypical school marm: soft spoken, very bright, and she didn't smile a lot. But Trish loved Carl. They ended up having a daughter, Cassandra. Cassy was the apple of Carl Barrett's eye. She was the reason he could continue to do his job. He was making the world safer for her.

When Barrett said goodbye to them that rainy December morning, it didn't seem any different from any other morning. Trish and Cassy were sitting at the breakfast table – Cassy eating her Cheerios and Trish grading papers. He didn't give it a second thought that he had forgotten to kiss them – to hug them both one last time. But he felt a little hung over and he was late anyway. He got on the Ventura Freeway near their home in the west end of the San Fernando Valley and headed to work.

Fifteen minutes later, Trish and Cassy got on the Freeway headed in the same direction. Like Carl, they would also take the Ventura Freeway east, but only as far as Woodland Hills where Trish taught in a private Catholic school and where Cassy was 6th Grader.

As they approached their exit, a large delivery truck filled with electronics equipment swerved across three lanes of traffic to make the same exit. The driver -- a gang member from East L.A. who was earning his stripes with what was supposed to be an easy truck jacking -- told the police later that he didn't see the little white Honda Civic. Trish and Cassy were killed instantly as their car was forced, head on, into a cement barrier.

Jimmy Moran was the Special Agent in Charge of Financial Crimes in the L.A. office at that time, and he was Carl Barrett's partner.

"Hey Jimmy, there's a call for Carl on Line 2," a secretary said.

"He's in the can -- probably reading the sports page from the L.A. Times. He'll be back in ten minutes," Moran replied.

"Then I think you better take it. Sounds like his wife got in an accident. The LAPD is trying to get a hold of Carl."

Looking back, it was a call that Jimmy Moran wished he'd never taken. But it was the right thing to do. When Barrett came back from the restroom, Moran shuttled him over to an

empty interrogation room that was nearby and told him about the call and what had happened to Barrett's wife and daughter.

"Fuck you Jimmy. Nothing happened to them. I just saw them an hour ago."

"I'm sorry Carl. Let me drive you out there," Moran replied.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't know what kind of sick stuff passes for humor in that brain of yours, but it isn't funny."

"Come on Carl, let's go."

Later, when they left the bloody scene of the accident, Barrett demanded the keys to the car.

"That's o.k., Carl. I'm going to drive us back to the office," Moran replied calmly.

"No, we're going to drive to the emergency room in at Encino Medical Center and I am going to kill me a gangbanger."

"Carl, I know how you must feel, but this isn't . . .," Moran started.

"Go to hell Jimmy! Your wife and kids are alive! You don't have the first idea how I feel! Now give me the keys!" Barrett screamed as he put his hand inside his sports coat, reaching for his service revolver.

"Don't do it Carl," Moran said calmly, without flinching.

Carl Barrett pulled his hand back out of his jacket sans pistol. "Some fucking partner you are. You should be going over there and killing that greasy little mother fucker for me."

Whether it was that Barrett couldn't forgive Jimmy Moran, or himself, or both, their relationship was never the same after that. Moran moved over to the counter-terrorism unit soon after that, and he eventually worked his way up to the Director spot. Barrett never even congratulated him.

The personnel director for the office came to talk to Director Moran shortly after he assumed his new post. "I know you and Carl Barrett have a history. And I know you've tried to protect him. But he has got to go. He's not able to work with anybody and it's going to become a safety issue."

"Let me intervene. If it doesn't work, then we'll find a way to ease him out."

Jimmy Moran decided to pair Barrett up with the new recruits. They didn't know better. It worked for a while. But now, with less than a year before Barrett was eligible for retirement, he hoped that Ron Choi would be able to handle the partner assignment.

"Look, Ron, I'd consider this a personal favor, you agreeing to team up with Carl. He's a good man. He's had some bad things happen to him. Can you just help me get him to retirement?" Moran asked.

"You know he's a bigot, right?" Choi asked.

"I understand he runs his mouth and says a lot of stupid things he doesn't mean. He's really old school, Ron. But you know what he's gone through. He's lost not only his family, but other agents that he knew over the years. We just need to get him to retirement, o.k.?"

Choi held his breath for a moment, thinking, and then exhaled.

"O.k., as a favor to you," Choi responded. At age 38, Ron Choi was already 15-year veteran of the Bureau. He grew up in Los Angeles and was on track for a leadership position in the Bureau one day. A very fit 6'2", he played football and basketball at San Marino High, and majored in business at U.S.C. Before moving to counter-terrorism, he had played a key role in a number of organized crime cases in Korea Town, the area that stretched west of the Downtown Financial District much of the way to Beverly Hills. More Koreans lived in Los Angeles than

anywhere else outside Korea. And Ron Choi was becoming a hometown hero. He had already been courted by the Korean community leaders for possible political office.

* * *

Director Moran was relieved to see Carl Barrett sitting in his office when he walked in. At least this way he wouldn't have to track Barrett down and yell at him in front of everyone.

Barrett sat expressionless across the desk from Moran.

"Carl, you're not making this easy, are you?" Moran asked.

"What's that, Jimmy, your political agenda? I mean, you assign this case to Randi Socia? I trained her! What, do you get points from headquarters in Washington for doing shit like that? Maybe they will give you a plaque for supporting women's rights. Or maybe it'll help you make Deputy Director of the entire Bureau someday? Politics. It's always politics with you."

"She's one of our best agents, Carl. You know that. She respected you more than anybody here. You were like a big brother to her for five years. She would have taken a bullet for you. Then she does some piddly ass thing like doesn't consult you before she does an interview on a minor witness, and you call her a '-for-nothing-bitch' in front of everybody in the unit. She couldn't consult with you because you were still drunk from the bender you were on the night before and you told her to leave you alone. What the hell, Carl?"

"She was wrong. I was the agent in charge."

"Yeah, but it didn't matter. You humiliated her for no reason. And it was because you were drunk."

"So what, you want to fire me now, Jimmy? Is that what the history lesson is about? Go ahead. I'll sue your ass for age discrimination."

“Listen to me, Carl. This is the biggest case we’ve ever had in this office. If you screw this up, people could die. A lot of people. And they will keep dying until we capture Jibril al-Attas.”

“I just don’t think you capture a terrorist by using another terrorist as bait.”

“Carl, that was always the plan and you knew it. We discussed it. I didn’t hear you speaking up. Now, if you can’t stay objective here, I’m going to reassign you.”

“But plans are made to be changed. You saw that guy. He’s stone cold.”

“I understand what you’re saying. But we’re working against the clock here, Carl. That means we have to take risks.”

“O.k., so I took a chance that maybe he was a handler for McVeigh, too.”

“Carl, you said it yourself. Stone cold. Did you think he was going to break down and start crying over Oklahoma City? Did you think you’d get him to confess?”

“He’s a cult leader. He tricked these people into helping him with some doomsday plot. And he’s working with al Qaeda again to make it happen. He’s a murderer. He killed women and children. Lots of dads can’t tuck their little girls in at night because of that piece of shit, Jimmy!” Barrett said, holding his finger out.

At first, Moran thought Barrett intended to shake his finger. But as Barrett held it out when he was done, and it still shook, he could see it was involuntary. Barrett was trembling. It was either the lack of booze, or he was about to break down and cry.

Moran rested his chin on his own thumb and index finger, thinking. *A dad who couldn’t tuck his little girl in at night.* That summed up what was left of Carl Barrett. It occurred to Jimmy Moran that his mistake was not in answering the phone that day, it happened later -- when he hadn’t forced his partner into grief counseling and rehab after Trish and Cassie were killed.

The man sitting across the desk from him was a time bomb. He needed to defuse Barrett before he exploded.

“O.k. We’re supposed to get a bunch of financial data in on him tomorrow. That was your specialty before moving to counter-terrorism. I need you to go over it. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Barrett replied grudgingly.

“Now go home and get some sleep.”

Barrett got up and walked out without another word.

Ron Choi stopped by Moran’s office about ten minutes later.

“You wanted to see me, Jimmy?” Choi asked.

“Yeah, sit down,” Moran sighed. “First, I want to thank you for stepping in there with the McVeigh thing.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Ron, I need you to go out with Cecil Hogue tomorrow on a field interview.”

“But isn't Carl going to need my help . . .,” Choi said, with some genuine protest.

“Its o.k., it’s on this case. Carl is going to be busy reviewing financial data anyway.

Cecil thinks he met Darrin Allis -- or at least saw him -- in Tanzania back in 1998 when he said he got hurt. Allis has a friend, Rod Warner, who may also have been there. I need you two to go talk with him. Then, I need you to coordinate with Gene Claussen and talk to this Dr. Scott Greenbaum that Allis mentioned.”

“Why Gene?”

“He got stuck with the Homeland Security liaison job, and Greenbaum has something to do with Los Angeles W.M.D. readiness. He made a presentation a while back that Gene attended.”

“But Carl is senior, shouldn't he be the one who . . .,” Choi began protesting again.

“Ron, are you going to make me spell this out? I need some finesse on this. I'm not going to let the bull loose in the china shop. These interviews aren't ones that will take advantage of Carl's skill sets. Got it? This is a big investigation. And we don't have a lot of time.”

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 61

It was the same dream every time. Usually, within a few weeks of the date in the scroll. The devil would come to him and try to trick him. It sounded right to Jibril at first - Satan pleading with him not to take any more lives. Jibril didn't really enjoy death. But it was necessary. And these dreams only ended up confirming for him that he was on the right path. Why would Satan try to convince him otherwise?

Jibril awoke to the sound of his own voice yelling, "I reject you Satan. Go now. Go now."

The door to his room swung open a few moments later and Ibrahim stood there, pistol drawn. "What is it my brother?"

It took Jibril a moment to remember where he was.

"It is all right, my brother. I just had a dream. Do not worry."

"What was it? Was it an omen of things to come?"

"No, just a temptation. Satan was standing before me, trying to convince me that we should stop our struggle. He shows me things," Jibril paused. He didn't want to tell Ibrahim the dreams were of children playing and mothers laughing. All alive one moment, dead the next.

"Are you sure it was Satan?"

"Yes, I am positive."

"How do you know?"

"Because I could tell from looking at him. He is a Jew."

"I see," Ibrahim said, nodding. "I have some tea and bread for you when you are ready." He walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Jibril didn't tell him how this dream was different than the others, though. How Satan had warned him that he would lose his own life this time. "Better to die for God, than live for the devil," he said out loud.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 62

He was certain he was drowning. He always thought it would be kind of peaceful to drown. But it wasn't. He found himself struggling. He couldn't breathe. He needed to get back to the surface. It was out of reach. He could hear Stacy's voice. But she didn't know where he was. He tried to yell, but water filled his lungs. As he sank, she appeared smaller and smaller. Finally, he could see her no more.

Darrin sat up in bed. He patted his chest with both hands, like someone looking for a misplaced wallet in their suit jacket. He was drenched. Not from the water he dreamed about, but from perspiration. He looked around his bedroom. He was alive.

The clock next to his bed read 5:58. The morning sun was peeking around the shades in his bedroom. He could hear traffic. What day is it? Thursday. His mouth tasted horrible. He had eaten Cheez-Its again before bed. *That was a bad idea*, he thought.

He figured he would go into work and help cover the breakfast shift. They had some new people who started that week, and he wasn't all that impressed with their ability, and less so with their enthusiasm.

He wondered what Stacy was doing. Probably rolling over before sleeping another hour. He wished he could wake up next to her. He had agreed with her that they should take things slowly, but this was getting old. What was the matter with staying over, anyway?

He stood in front of the toilet for a minute thinking about baseball. It would hurt if he tried to start the urine stream in his current physical condition. Plus, he worried that forcing a whiz when his apparatus was still hard might make him incontinent when he got older. He wondered if that was possible. *Incontinence from trying to pee through an erection. Okay, that did the trick. Not a problem anymore.* He could pee.

Of course, he also could have just jumped in the shower and eventually peed in there, but he had never gotten into the habit. And his training was otherwise. There was a strict rule against it in his Army unit. In fact, they even put up signs “Piss in the shower and you’ll swim in the toilet.” And he had seen that threat backed up when a burly corporal dunked a PFC 2nd Class head first into a bright yellow liquid stew of first-thing-in-the-morning whiz.

As he stood in the shower, he thought about what Barrett and Choi had told him about Jibril. He knew Jibril was associated with a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia, but he had never made the bin Laden connection. *Could Jibril be dangerous?* Darrin had only taken him for a “watcher.” *And why would he want to hurt me? He saved my life that day in Dar es Salaam.*

No, the FBI is trying to scare me into talking. Somehow they found out about Jibril and that he wanted to get the rest of the dates in the scroll. Probably some informant. I just need to keep “stonewalling.” He was confident he was one of only three people in the world who knew what that scroll was about. And Darrin knew the other two weren’t talking either.

He scarfed down some eggs and sausage after he arrived at the Assistance Center. He walked into Althea’s office looking for a can of Sterno to keep the eggs warm when the phone rang. “Pico Avenue Assistance Center, may I help you?” he asked.

“Darrin? Is that you?”

“Yes. Althea?”

“Why are you in so early?”

“Well, I left early last night,” he said.

“You leave five minutes early, so you come in three hours early to make up for it? Little much, isn’t it sweetie?”

“I know. Just a little worried about some of the new recruits. It’s their first week and all.”

“You never cease to amaze. O.k., well I wanted to leave word for you that I won’t be in until around noon today. Can you cover things?”

“Sure thing.”

“O.k. Take a break and read the paper or something. Bye, now,” she said as she hung up.

He loved her. She was his replacement mom. Not that his mom could be replaced, mind you. But she was the closest thing. Althea was someone who really worried about taking time off. She usually scheduled mornings off days in advance. He hoped she wasn’t sick. She sounded a little distant. His mom had sounded that way sometimes after she was diagnosed.

* * *

Darrin’s mother had been complaining about a pain in her abdomen for a couple of months. Her general physician scheduled her for some tests at the University Hospital in Indianapolis. She got the results back the following week.

“Hi Mom, how’d the tests go?” he asked

“Oh, not so good,” she said sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve got a tumor in my large intestine the size of a lemon.”

“Oh, no. No.”

“The doctor says they need to operate this week. He’s afraid it’s going to rupture the wall of my intestines,” she said, starting to cry.

“O.k., Mom, let’s take it a step at a time.”

No response. Just crying on the other end of the line. Soon there was crying on both ends of the line. His father got on the phone.

“It’s been a tough day, son.”

He took a deep breath. He didn’t want his dad to hear him cry.

“Yeah. Pretty tough.”

“She’s going in tomorrow morning for the blood work-ups and screenings. Then she goes in Thursday morning for the surgery.”

“I’ll catch a flight tomorrow and be to Muncie by late afternoon.”

“Why don’t you wait, Darrin. Wait until this weekend she’s out of recovery. She’ll need to be in the hospital for a few days anyway. Jane’s here and Andrea’s on her way from Miami.” Jane and Andrea were Darrin’s sisters. Andrea was in her first term as a Florida state senator representing the West Palm Beach area.

He arrived that weekend. His mother was out of the critical care unit and into a regular hospital room - if you could call it regular. A woman in the final stages of bone cancer lay moaning in a bed on the other side of a curtain dividing the room. His mother seemed to wince with sympathy.

“Hi mom.”

“Hi sweetie,” she rasped, her throat sore from the breathing tube.

“How are you feeling?”

“Been better.”

“Yeah,” he said, choking back the tears.

He sat and held her hand without talking for a half hour. Her eyes opened and shut and she slipped in and out of sleep. His sisters and father had gone home to get some rest.

After about an hour, and a couple of visits from nurses checking his mother's vitals, the surgeon came in and delivered what seemed to be a death sentence.

"Hello, I'm Doctor Faisal. You must be her son?"

"Yes, hello Doctor."

"Mrs. Allis, are you awake?"

She opened her eyes, and seemed a little startled.

"Mrs. Allis, I'm Doctor Faisal. I operated on you and I'm here to check on you."

"Yes," she rasped.

"I performed the resection on your large intestine."

"This is my son."

"Yes, we just met. I want you to know that we think we got all of the tumor. And we also took out a half dozen lymph nodes near the tumor. Your oncologist will be able to tell you more later when the biopsy results come back."

"So how far has the cancer spread, Doctor?" Darrin asked. "I mean, assuming it's a malignant tumor."

"Well, there is little doubt it's malignant," he said dismissively. "We describe progression in stages. Colon cancer progresses in four stages. Stage 1 is the earliest. I'm afraid this appears somewhere between Stages 3 and 4. Stage 3 means it has spread to surrounding lymph nodes. Stage 4 means it has spread to other organs. That would be the liver first, usually, then the lungs. In this case, I think it has just recently spread to the liver. I palpated the liver and I think I felt a lump or two there. But your mother's oncologist will need to confirm that with an ultrasound."

“What is the survival rate for Stage 4 colon cancer, Dr Faisal?” Darrin asked, not thinking it might be better to leave that for later.

“I think that would be a better question for the oncologist. But I wanted to come by and let you know that the resection was successful at least. If we had waited much longer -- maybe just days -- you might have died if the tumor had ruptured through your colon.”

“O.k.,” his mother said.

“Thank you, Dr. Faisal,” Darrin said.

The doctor nodded and left.

“I talked to your father. I’m not doing chemo,” his mother said almost immediately.

“Mom, let's wait until we hear what the oncologist says.”

“Well, what do you think he'll say? He’s a cancer doctor. He’ll say fight the cancer any way you can.”

“No,” Darrin shot back. “You're doing the chemo or whatever the oncologist says.”

“Darrin, we both know that I'm not going to survive this. Your dad's friend Roger went through this. The chemo was worse than the cancer.”

“But there's at least a chance with the chemo that you can put this in remission and live another five or ten years.”

“And there's a bigger chance that I won't,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I've had a good life. I've got six beautiful children and thirteen grandchildren. I've cheated death already - pneumonia when I was a little girl, polio when I was a teenager. But death is always going to win eventually. And I'm not going to run from it.”

Darrin’s father was wrong about many things, but one thing he was absolutely right about -- Viola Allis was probably the most stubborn woman in the world. Once she made up her mind,

neither heaven nor earth would move her. Even with tubes sticking out of her slender frame laying there on that hospital bed, her eyes were still bright and alive. The look in those eyes said it all -- she was going to try to face whatever came with dignity.

And she did. She died with her husband and children at her bedside -- nine months to the day she was diagnosed. It was the first and last time he ever saw his father cry.

* * *

On weekdays, they served breakfast for two hours at the Assistance Center, until 9:30 a.m. Then they would clear the dining room and clean it. The trays, glasses, coffee cups, and silverware would be washed and they would get ready for the 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. lunch shift. After that, they would clear the dining room again and clean it in preparation for the 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. dinner shift. They did this three times a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. They served over a quarter of a million meals a year to at least 5,000 different people.

It made Darrin feel good being a part of this. He looked forward to going to work every day. He was part of something that helped bring some dignity and humanity to people who had experienced very little of either in their lives. He felt like when people at least had a full stomach and a roof over their heads, they were, for just a moment at least, on the same level as any doctor, lawyer, corporate CEO, movie star, or other important person. Soon enough they would be back out on the street struggling to survive. But there was that one moment where they wouldn't be thinking about the hand that fate had dealt them -- a moment where he could see smiles on some faces, even laughter sometimes.

As he stood behind the workers serving cafeteria trays of sandwiches, cooked vegetables, and cake, he looked out at the people in the nearly full dining room. These would be the people who would pay the price. Just like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The wealthy would pack

up and go. These people would be trapped. Whatever was coming “out of the waters” didn’t seem likely to wash over Beverly Hills or Brentwood or Bel Air.

What good would all the money in the world do for the Pico Avenue Assistance Center? You can’t feed dead people. Trying to think of a way out hurt his head. It was like trying to find a different answer to $2 + 2 = 4$. It always came up the same. And he wasn’t dealing with an addition problem either. It was a multiplication problem – “But greater still is the curse on those who would try to keep these things from coming to pass. For they will bring death to themselves and multiply the sorrows to man.”

Darrin knew firsthand the multiplication problem in Dar es Salaam – how what should have been one embassy became two. Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. And if that were somehow a coincidence, Johnny proved the truth of it on September 11th – one airplane became three. And it probably would have been four airplanes had it not been for some real heroes in the sky above Shanksville, Pennsylvania who gave their lives fighting the al Qaeda terrorists who had hijacked the plane.

He wished he had spoken to his mother about all this. She would have made him feel better about what to do. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, though. She was already “cursed” with colon cancer. He didn’t want to make her final days worse. And to take away the hope of an after life. It would be hard not tell her that part. It was the horrible secret that engulfed all of the death and misery in the scroll.

* * *

He had tried so many times to tell somebody. He sent anonymous letters. Nobody ever really took it seriously. He first tried to broach the topic with Al Bryant when he got back to Ft.

Riley. He told him there was the scroll and how the language of it was very bizarre. Sort of predicting the future maybe.

“You gonna go crazy on me or something Captain? You just spent six months in a hot desert. Your chaplain’s assistant is getting discharged for destroying this relic? But it told the future or something? If you start babbling about predictions and prophecies, they are going to kick you out too.”

Darrin was disappointed in the lack of support. If you couldn’t tell your commanding officer, who is supposed to be religious for God’s sake, who else could you tell?

Bryant sensed Darrin’s frustration. “Look, you covered my ass over there and I was able to come home and be with my wife. She’s still touch and go. But I appreciate I could be with her. Now, take my advice here because I’m really trying to help you. Forget. About. It. You hear me?”

“Yes sir. But what if there is something I could do to help warn the Army, the government?”

“Warn ‘em about what? Some crap you think you read, in Greek I might add, from a scroll that is now a pile of ashes. Hmmm. Let’s see,” Bryant said, pretending to pull out a tape and measuring Darrin’s shoulders and torso.

“Yep, a medium would fit,” Bryant said.

“Sir?”

“They issue those straightjackets in small, medium and large. A medium would be right for you. You got me?” Bryant concluded.

He passed Bryant’s comments on to Johnny and Hennessey, hoping to confirm what they had agreed on already.

“I think he’s right. For now at least. So do we still agree? No talking about the scroll or anything in it.”

“Yes sir,” said Johnny.

“Hennessey?”

“Hey, I still think there was something really creepy about even hearing the stuff. But you guys are all tough. I’m not talking though.”

Darrin was the only one who hadn’t completely broken the promise they made that day. Not that he hadn’t wanted to though.

* * *

“There’s got to be a way,” he said out loud.

“A way to do what Darrin?” Althea asked, startling him. She was back now. It was almost 1 p.m., so whatever she had to do took even longer than she thought.

“Oh, hi. Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

“Let’s have a talk in my office,” she said sternly.

Chapter 63

“He told me to give him a call on his cell phone when we get to St. John’s,” Agent Gene Claussen said to Ron Choi. “He’ll meet us out in the parking lot. He’s on his way to a meeting at Cedars-Sinai.”

The two men had worked in the counter-terrorism unit in the FBI’s Los Angeles Office for almost five years. Since right after 9/11 when half of all agents in the office were switched over to the unit.

“So what’s this guy’s specialty?” Choi asked.

“Toxicology. You know, chemicals, poisons, and how they make people sick.”

“I still don’t understand why he flew all the way to Tanzania to help Darrin Allis.”

“Sounds like he’s friends with this Warner guy. You’re interviewing him later, huh?”

“Yes, going out this afternoon with Cecil.”

“I still can’t get over that, ‘Hey y’all, that man died,’” Claussen said mockingly.

“What’d he say when he saw him on the monitor for Interrogation 3?” Choi asked.

“Nothing much.”

“Let’s see if Dr. Greenbaum can shed some light. We’re a couple minutes away now. You should call him.”

Agents Choi and Claussen waited another 15 minutes in the parking lot for Scott Greenbaum.

“I guess he really is a doctor, making us wait like this,” Claussen whispered to Choi as Scott Greenbaum exited the hospital and walked toward them.

“Hi, Dr. Greenbaum, I’m Gene Claussen. We met at the Homeland Security briefing.”

“Yeah, hey, how are you doing?” Greenbaum replied, obviously not remembering him.

“This is Special Agent Ron Choi.”

“Hi.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Greenbaum.”

“You said on the phone this had something to do with my trip to Africa back in August of 1998?”

“Yes, we were just trying to track down some details. That was an early al Qaeda planned attack at the Embassy in Tanzania. We understand you were on the ground there after it happened.”

“Yes, for a little while. There and in Nairobi. I went over under the auspices of the Centers for Disease Control. There was a concern that the bombs may have had some chemical or biological warfare components.”

“And did they?”

“No, not that we could ever find. And we tested about everybody we could. We concluded they were just explosives. Horrible thing just the same.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Agent Choi said, nodding. “We understand you went over there with a guy named Rod Warner?”

Dr. Greenbaum’s jaw dropped open a little and he looked back and forth at the FBI agents. “Is there some problem?” he asked. *They wouldn’t be coming after me for taking a non-technical person on a government-paid trip*, he thought to himself. *Not after eight years.*

“Well, your name came up in connection with somebody who was injured in the attack. Do you know a Darrin Allis?”

He nodded his head slowly. *No good deed goes unpunished*, he thought to himself.

“Darrin and Rod Warner are friends that go way back. They grew up together back in Indiana. It so happened that Darrin got injured and Rod Warner wanted to go check on him. I needed help since it was a last minute thing, and Rod came along with me.”

“Do you recall the nature of Darrin Allis’s injuries?”

“Yeah, he had a really close call. He almost died.”

“That’s what we understand. So did you treat him?”

“I assisted another physician there, yes.”

“But you’re a toxicologist, right?”

Dr. Greenbaum could sense the line of questioning wasn’t going in a good direction.

“Yes, that’s my specialty,” he replied.

“And that’s the funny thing, though. You know Rod Warner and he goes with you on this CDC sanctioned trip. But his friend also just happens to be injured in the Embassy bombing.”

“Yeah, kind of a coincidence I guess.”

“Did Darrin Allis get injured with chemicals or something? I still don’t understand why you were there with him?”

“You know, I was there with the CDC. I also did what I could to help a U.S. citizen. I’m sure you would have done the same.”

“But back to my question,” Agent Choi pressed. “Did he get injured with chemicals or something toxic?”

“You know, we’re getting close to a line here that I can’t really cross as a doctor. He was injured. I treated him. I can’t really go into specifics of things. I’m sorry.”

Agent Claussen sensed that this wasn't a good time to take on a doctor involved in Homeland Security. Not good for relations between the FBI and the CDC. He stepped in, "We understand. We understand. We respect the doctor/patient confidentiality issue. Maybe Rod Warner would be able to help us with that part."

"Maybe," he replied.

"O.k., well thanks for your time, Dr. Greenbaum," Agent Claussen said.

"Yes, thanks," Agent Choi added, not as sincerely.

"You got it," Scott Greenbaum said, looking at his watch. "I'm late, gotta go." *And, he thought, good luck with Rod Warner. You won't find out anything he doesn't want you to know. I've been playing poker with him for ten years and I still can't get a read on him.*

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 64

Stacy had a hard time trying to focus on the task at hand – the photo shoot she was doing. Darrin had asked her a few weeks before if she might have some time to put together a series of shots on some of the clients who used the Pico Avenue Assistance Center. But not while they were at the Center eating. Instead, he wanted shots of them where they lived. She learned from Darrin that there were several places in West L.A. where homeless people congregated. Under highway overpasses, alleys behind strip malls, high traffic areas where they could ask for money.

It was actually kind of a dangerous project. A lot of homeless people get upset when someone comes around taking their picture. She made sure she asked first. And told them it was helping the Assistance Center.

She was amazed that, with all the wealth in Los Angeles, there was this whole other world. Like the third world. Sometimes even worse. People with little to eat, no shelter, and lots of medical problems. Often being robbed and exploited.

She was happy to help Darrin with the photos. But it was such a contrast. He supposedly has millions of dollars – even though he wasn't letting on. And he's spending his days hanging out with people who have nothing.

Although her own family was affluent, she was taught to think about those less fortunate. As a kid, she used to walk around her neighborhood collecting money for the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. But it could be so heart-wrenching thinking about the problems and poverty. You had to block it out if you want to live a normal life. Otherwise, it could just consume you.

Maybe that's the way it should be though, she thought. Maybe Darrin got consumed. Maybe he couldn't deal with living an extravagant lifestyle while so many around him had nothing. He wouldn't be the first person to feel that way.

But she had to find out. And dinner tonight with Darrin would be where she'd do it. *How was your day, Darrin? Oh, that's nice. And where did all that money come from that you have? How do I know? Oh, Tina was rummaging through your stuff. Saw bank statements. Yeah, wasn't nice was it? And who is this Sanchez guy you send money to every month? Yeah, she saw that too.*

Didn't sound so good as she thought it through. And what if Tina was wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. Their relationship could be big-time messed up if he thought she was doing unwanted snooping into his life. *Better to be asked. Invited in. That was the answer. Open your toolbox, Stacy. It'd his own good anyway.*

Chapter 65

“Mustafa, here is the map,” Ibrahim said.

Ibrahim saw a flash of Jibril’s hand out of the corner of his eye and felt the sting on his cheek from being slapped.

“Never say that name out loud again!” Jibril whispered sharply.

“My apologies brother. It slipped.”

Jibril sat looking at Ibrahim. If the house was bugged the Americans might know that al Qaeda’s new Number 3 man was in their country. His brother and Ayman al-Zawahiri referred to him only as “Mustafa” to protect his true identity. Only Ibrahim and a few others in al Qaeda knew Mustafa was Jibril al-Attas.

Jibril picked up the papers and pointed toward the door to the garage. They exited the house and got into Jibril’s rental car.

“Again, many apologies. I am sorry,” Ibrahim said dejectedly after the doors to the car were closed.

“I am sorry my brother. I do not fear for my own life. You know that. It is the jihad you risk by saying that name. And you risk my family. Now drive,” he said.

* * *

Jibril had been married to his second wife, Jahan, for two years before it occurred to him that he might have a problem. His first wife, Hafsa, had not been able to conceive. He decided it was better not to divorce Hafsa, but to simply marry again. What other man would marry a barren woman? He would treat Hafsa equally, as was required under Sharia law whenever a man took more than one wife.

But things were no different with Jahan. They were told by a doctor that one in twelve women is infertile. What are the chances of marrying two such women? While a man could divorce a woman without cause by merely uttering the phrase "I divorce you" three times over the course of three months, a woman would be granted a divorce only under very limited conditions – a man's insanity, leprosy, or infertility. No man in Jibril's family had ever been humiliated that way. He would not be the first.

Why was he being punished this way by God? Was it another test? Maybe it was to be this way so that Jibril could not be captured by the Americans and then forced to speak in order to protect his children. That must be it. He wouldn't talk even if Hafsa and Janan were murdered in front of him. But children – his own flesh and blood. That would be different. That must be the reason.

So he kept Hafsa near his childhood home in Jedda. But Janan he kept in Damascus. She got along much better with his mother, who also lived there. He hadn't seen Hafsa for three years. And it had been several months since he had been with Janan. Both would probably have to be moved to a safer place soon though.

It was hard living the way he had chosen to live. Men were not created to live without the comfort of a woman. He told himself this many times over the years when he broke the Sharia prohibitions on adultery. But God would understand. Jibril was a warrior in a foreign land. He was away from home, and his wives, because God willed it.

* * *

They had wound around the backstreets of Rancho Santa Margarita area for 15 minutes making sure no one was following them.

"Let me see the map now," Jibril ordered Ibrahim.

Ibrahim pulled the car over to the curb.

“These are the reservoirs,” Ibrahim said, pointing.

“And you are sure we have the amount of biological agent necessary?”

“Yes, we gave the information on the average volume of the reservoir to the scientists in Pakistan. They said it would work.”

“And how do we know the supplies we have will work?”

“I have carried them with me and have kept them at the prescribed temperature at all times.”

“And what about filtration systems? Won't the water be treated before it is passed on to the city water supply?”

“Yes, there is some minimal treatment. But remember, this is not water from sewage treatment. This is the water pumped in from the mountains north of here into the reservoirs.”

“And how do we know they won't detect these agents in the water before they are passed along?”

“They are at least a year away from putting in place the technology to do that. Their own published Homeland Security reports foolishly say that.”

“What is the technology?”

“Fish. A certain type of fish in this part of the world known as a bluegill. They put electronic sensors on the fish to detect contamination. If the fish begin to struggle, they would know they have been poisoned. They use this already in New York.”

“And they don't have these in their reservoirs in Los Angeles?”

“No.”

“Foolish aren't they?”

“Yes, brother.”

“And this cannot be detected by human taste or smell?”

“No, it’s a water-borne virus. It is too small to be detected.”

“And how long before they will begin showing symptoms?”

“24 hours.”

“And how long before it will be fatal?”

“24 hours after that.”

Jibril grinned and shook his head.

“It is like, how do the Americans say it? Shooting fish in a barrel?”

This was part of the reason Jibril al-Attas was his brother's favorite, and the heir apparent to lead the jihad. He not only knew what was right, he could do what was right. Technically, Ayman al-Zawahiri was the Number 2 man in al Qaeda. Their own fathers had died long ago, and the brothers both loved al-Zawahiri like a father. But he was old, and running from the Americans had taken its toll. Of course, it had taken an even bigger toll on Jibril's brother, Osama. No, al-Zawahiri did not have the fire left to lead al Qaeda for the next 20 years after Osama was gone. Both his brother and al-Zawahiri had agreed that Jibril al-Attas – technically only a half-brother of Osama bin Laden by blood, but a full brother in ideology -- would take over should anything happen to them. Jibril was the future of al Qaeda. And after Los Angeles, Jibril al-Attas would be formally introduced to the world.

Chapter 66

Darrin sat down across from Althea's desk. Althea sat in her chair, her hands folded on her desk.

"You know I have to be honest Darrin. When I got your resume four years ago and saw that you had been a Baptist minister, I didn't think I wanted to hire you. I honestly didn't know how you would fit in to a shelter were there is so much color."

"Not all Baptists are like that Althea. There are a lot of good people – white people – who are Baptists.

"I know. But you have to understand, it was some Baptist men that beat my grandfather nearly to death back in South Carolina in the 1920s. My mother would tell me that story and that I always needed to be careful."

"Well, that stuff doesn't happen as much anymore."

"Maybe not beatings, but I haven't seen too much in my life since from the Baptists that made me comfortable. The methods may have changed, maybe the attitudes a bit, but there still is a hostility there toward people of color. A negative energy that I want to avoid in my life."

Darrin nodded.

"But I thought to myself, 'Life is about second chances.' And I hired you. I've never regretted my decision. You have never let me down. You have exceeded all my expectations. I don't think I could have stayed here without your help. You have been a God send."

"Well, that's very kind of you to say Althea."

She pursed her full lips and nodded her head up and down. "Yes, you are one of a kind, Darrin Allis."

Darrin smiled and shrugged.

“But one thing that has always struck me about you. In four years of working side-by-side with you, I have never heard you talk about God or anything you believe in.”

“Well, I don’t wear that stuff on my shirt sleeve,” he said.

“But you were a minister. A minister who doesn’t talk about God? That seems funny.”

“I used to be a minister. I guess that’s the difference.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she said, nodding. “But you seem like a man who has lost his faith.”

Darrin just raised his eyebrows.

“Why do you do this, then? Why do you help people? Here I was afraid you would want to preach to these people and I would have to watch you every second.”

He smiled. “I suppose it’s the same reason you do this, Althea. These people need help. I can help them. So I help.”

“Yes. Yes. But I help because I’m giving back to the Lord just a little bit of what he gave to me,” Althea explained.

“Well, I’m kind of that way,” Darrin said. *But not really*, he thought.

“Darrin, I look at you and I see a man who’s carrying around a lot of bags. Bags that are way too heavy for one man to carry.”

“How do you mean?”

“The way you carry yourself. The way you deal with things. You just have this aura around you – like you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop, you know?”

“Well, I think we all have different ways of approaching life.”

“I know, I know,” she said. “But you don’t seem to have any hope about tomorrow. You know? It’s like you’re an 80-year-old man. That’s the way I would describe it. Is there anything you look forward to? Any dreams?”

“I’ve had a lot happen to me in my life.”

“I know sweetie. I’m not criticizing you. I’m just trying to understand.”

“O.k.”

“You know Darrin, people will tell you that love is what makes the world go around. But that’s not it. Love isn’t what makes people get up in the morning. Hope is. Hope that today will be better than yesterday and hope that tomorrow will be better than today.”

Darrin didn’t respond.

“That’s a little of what we give the people here at the Center. They know that when they wake up tomorrow, there’s a chance for them. At least they know where they can come and get a meal.”

He nodded his head in agreement.

“And you look at these terrorists they come from a place where there is no hope for them. It’s a lot like those boys down in South Central during the riots. They’ve got no hope. What do they care if the TV camera shows them stealing something from a storefront? They have no grand expectations of what tomorrow will bring.”

“You’ve gotta have hope,” Althea said, turning to look out the window on the warm Los Angeles afternoon. “Otherwise, it’s all meaningless.”

* * *

George Clark still looked strong there in his hospital bed. He was heavily medicated with morphine for the pain. His liver had failed earlier in the day, and his kidneys had soon followed. Althea knew there wasn’t much time left. She and her mother sat on either side of him, each holding a hand.

He opened his eyes – yellowed from the liver failure -- and smiled when he saw Althea. He squeezed her hand. He was always a strong man. But his grip was much weaker today.

“Knock, knock,” he said. He used to love doing “knock knock” jokes with Althea when she was a little girl.

Tears welled up in Althea’s eyes. “Who’s there?” she whispered back.

“Althea.” She knew how this one went. She didn’t want to respond.

“Althea,” he repeated.

“Althea who,” she said, with tears streaming down her face.

“Althea later alligator,” he said, with a momentary twinkle in his eyes. He always used to do that before he would leave for work in the morning. But she knew why he was doing it now.

“Knock, knock,” he continued.

“Quiet now, Daddy,” she said.

“Knock, knock,” he said, insistently.

“Who’s there?” she said.

“Jesus. Jesus is knocking.”

With that, he closed his eyes. And that was Althea’s last conversation with her father. She hoped – she prayed – she would see him again one day. Tell him how much he meant to her. Have one last “knock knock” joke.

* * *

“Darrin,” Althea said, turning back from the window.

“Yes.”

“You’re in some sort of trouble.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Michael got a phone call late last night. I don’t know if you even know how much trouble you are in.”

“I’m not sure I understand, Althea.”

“The FBI thinks you are involved with something. Something dangerous.”

He held his breath a moment and exhaled deeply.

“Darrin, have you done something you want to tell me about?” Althea asked sadly, like a mother who comes home to find her cookie jar shattered on the kitchen floor.

He thought for a moment about the right way to answer. “Althea, I haven’t done anything wrong. I may not have done enough things right in my life. But I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Why is the FBI so interested in you then?”

He wanted to tell her. He had wanted to tell his mother. He needed to tell somebody.

“I can’t say,” he said, without looking up.

Althea took a deep breath. And then she put her hands on top of her head.

“Okay,” she said. “But if you change your mind, I’m here.”

Chapter 67

Rod Warner pulled his black Cadillac Escalade up the circle drive in front of his house. He got a lot of grief from the environmentalist “tree huggers” in Brentwood about driving such a gas guzzler. “Well, I could trade it in for some Nazi-mobile or some piece of Japanese crap,” he liked to say, “but then I’d be letting down my auto worker brothers back in Muncie.”

Of course, it had been 60 years since the Nazis controlled the German auto industry. And Japanese quality in automobiles had exceeded that of American automobiles for nearly twenty years. And, what was more, it had been almost twenty years since General Motors left Muncie. So unless Rod’s “brothers” moved to the South or to Mexico, he wouldn’t be letting them down by buying a foreign car. Unfortunately for the beleaguered U.S. auto industry, much of America had awoken to the same realization.

What Rod really liked was the feeling of power behind the wheel of a mammoth SUV. And he was willing to pay twice as much in gas a year to get it. He had always hoped someone would at least try to cut him off. *Just try it. I’m not going to stop*, he’d think to himself. *And your little Toyota Prius is going to get flattened like a tin can.* But they must have sensed that the man in the Escalade was not someone to mess with.

As he stepped down out of the Escalade, he noticed two men standing at his front door. Halfway up his front steps he said, “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

The Asian man he didn’t recognize. But when the white guy turned to face him, he knew they had met before. And it only took a moment to remember.

“Aaah. Dr. Warner I presume,” the white guy said with a grin as big as his Southern accent.

“Mista’ Warner’d be fine, mate,” Rod said, trying to keep at least part of his cover with an Australian accent.

“I’m Agent Hogue, this is Agent Choi. We’re with the FBI,” Hogue said.

“Crikey,” Rod said, pouring it on. “You’re the bloke from Dar es Salaam, ain’t ya?”

“Oh, you remember me?” Hogue smiled.

“Rememba’? I’ve felt bad fa eight yeez about the mistake I made.”

“Can we go in the house and talk?” Agent Choi asked.

“Oh, where’s me manners. O’ course,” Rod replied, opening the door. “Let me see if the maid is ‘ere. Marisa. Marisa?”

Marisa came from the kitchen area.

“Yes, Mister Rod?”

“Marisa, these gentl’men have come to visit, can you get ‘em something?” Rod continued in his accent.

Marisa looked confused. Rod winked.

“It’s o.k. They ‘ere to ‘elp.”

“Can I get you something to drink? Iced teas? Sodas?”

“No, I’m fine,” responded Agent Choi.

“Oh, I could use an iced tea. Lot’s of sugar. Sweet tea. You know?” asked Cecil Hogue.

“Yes, Mister. I’ll get it,” she replied.

“Gentl’men, come ov’r to the livin’ room,” Rod said.

As they sat in the spacious living room, Hogue commented on the high ceilings. “Lordy, must be 15 feet up there?”

“Yeah, me favorite room of the ‘ouse. Skylight provides a lot of light. Feels like you’re outside, but you’re inside with the air conditioning.”

He waited a moment until Choi and Hogue were done looking around.

“So what can I do for you this afternoon gentl’men?”

“We understand you have a friend named Darrin Allis,” Agent Choi began.

Rod smiled and nodded. He was thinking how much he’d like to slug Darrin in the arm right now. When they were kids, that was their way of letting each other know when a line had been crossed. Your arm ached for a couple of minutes. You got the message. But no lasting damage. And you stayed friends.

Too bad there wasn’t a way to do that kind of thing in the world today, Rod thought. Just resolve minor misunderstandings by punching someone in the meaty part of the upper arm where it met the shoulder. You get the anger out of your system. And the recipient feels a little of the pain you felt from fill in the blank: cutting in line at the grocery store, not taking turns at a four-way stop, not flushing the john in the public restroom, leaving their cell phone on in the theater. A sharp pain, then it was gone. Everybody could go on. Instead, people carried all this friggin’ stress around from the little crap that people did in everyday society. That’s why people are so unhappy. They go home and blow their brains out. No civility. And no way to enforce civility.

“O’ course, Darrin. We been mates for yearz,” he replied.

“From . . ., Australia?” Agent Hogue asked.

“Oh, me accent,” Rod laughed. “Sorry. Spent a lotta yearz on me ranch outside Sydney. ‘ard to lose the accent. It’s kinda second naycha. No, Darrin and I been mates since growin’ up in Muncie, Indiana.”

Marisa brought the iced tea to Hogue.

“Are you sure I can't get you something Mister?” she asked Choi.

“No, I'm fine. Really,” Choi replied.

Marisa looked at Rod for any further instructions. Getting none, she walked out.

“What was he doing in Dar es Salaam?” Agent Choi asked. “He says he doesn't remember.”

“Well, if you were in a coma you'd 'ave a 'ard time remembering too,” Rod replied.

“You saw him there Agent 'ogue. He was almost dead when we got there.”

“Yeah, that's what it seemed like,” Hogue replied. “So how did Scott Greenbaum help Darrin Allis?”

“Scott?” Rod replied.

“Yes, I spoke with him earlier,” Agent Choi said. “He said you might be able to help us understand why Dr. Greenbaum happened to be treating Darrin.”

And there's another person that needs to be slugged in the arm, Rod thought to himself.

“Scott's a fri'nd of mine too. I called 'im as soon as I found out Darrin was injahed.”

“But he's a toxicologist. Why would you call him?” Choi asked.

“He's a doc. And he's a fri'nd. No other reason.” It was true, Rod thought to himself. He had gotten lucky. Better to be lucky than good – most of the time.

“So what was the mistake?” Hogue asked.

“What's that?” Rod asked.

“You said outside earlier that you had felt bad for eight years about a mistake.”

“Oh. Yeah. Crikey. I meant the mistake of thinkin' you were there to get Darrin in a pickle for something.”

“Why did you think I would be there to do that?”

It was time for Rod to play his ace in the hole. He had hoped he would never have to. But as a “retiree” with nothing better to occupy him, he’d had a long time to think about Dar es Salaam and all the possible angles.

“Well, I’ve got to be honest with you gentl’men.” *Never trust someone who says they have to be honest*, Rod thought. “I found a letta’ he got back from the blokes at the State Department, and I was concerned somethin’ was amiss.”

“A letter?”

“Yeah, he ‘ad apparently written the State Department a number of times and warned them they needed to beef up embassy security. They must have gotten sick of all ‘is lettas, so they told ‘im not to write to ‘em anymore. I found it in ‘is room after I got word he had been wounded in the Embassy bombing. He used to live ‘ere, you know.”

“Do you have a copy of the letter?”

“I do. Come back ‘ere to my office.”

The agents got up and followed Rod back to his office where he opened a lower drawer on his desk.

“‘ere it is,” he said handing it to the agents.

Agent Hogue reached over to take it, and both he and Choi read it at the same time.

“This is addressed to someone named Warren Webber,” Choi noted.

“Yeah, threw me at first too. But it goes back to when we were kids. Darrin always had a nice voice. The teacher would always pick ‘im to sing in class. Just like Potsie Webber from ‘appy Days. So we would call him Potsie because we were a little jealous of him.”

“And the Warren part?”

“Potsie’s real name on the show was Warren Webber. If you knew ‘ow many times Darrin Allis ‘as seen every episode of ‘appy Days, you wouldn’t be surprised ‘e would pick that name.”

“Why wouldn’t he just use his real name?”

“I don’t know. Afraid maybe. Maybe he didn’t want to get too involved.”

“Does he know you have this?”

“No, he doesn’t remember anything about what ‘appened then. I figured I would keep this – seemed like it would clear ‘im. Not that ‘e needed to be cleared.”

“What do you mean?” asked Choi.

“Well, that’s why I’ve felt bad all these yearz. I was trying to protect Darrin from Agent ‘ogue, and Agent ‘ogue seemed to be there to pin a medal on Darrin or something. Apparently ‘e was out in front of the Embassy trying to keep people away. Isn’t that what you recall ‘earing Agent ‘ogue?”

“Yeah, that’s what I remember.”

“Has Darrin Allis ever asked you to keep anything for him?” asked Choi.

Rod thought for a moment. “No. Nothing,” he said shaking his head.

“How long did he live here with you?” Agent Choi asked.

“Well, for about three yearz. From early 1998 until I got engaged in the Spring of 2001.”

“Have you ever known him to travel outside the country?”

“No, Tanzania was the only trip I know of. And we’re pretty close. I keep pretty good track of ‘im.”

“How about inside the country. Where has he traveled?”

“Spent a lot of time flying back to Muncie in the last couple of years. His mom had cancer and died last year. His dad, and a brother and sister are still back there.”

“Do you remember where he was back in 2001. In September?”

“Yeah, ‘e went to Chicago to visit some Army buddy of ‘is.”

“Do you remember the name.”

“Yeah, ‘ard to forget. The guy was a real piece of work. A nut job I think. Johnny Duran.”

“Why do you think he was a nut job?”

“Oh. Sorry, shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

“He died?” Choi asked, knowing the answer.

“Yeah, got killed in 9/11. I don’t really know ‘ow it happened. But it was kind of like the guy knew something was coming. I know he contacted Darrin earlier in the year.”

“Wait, he contacted Darrin about 9/11 you think?”

“All I know is that Darrin was leading a normal life here in Los Angeles.”

Hogue smiled.

“O.k., normal for L.A.,” Rod said, responding to Hogue’s reaction. “‘e was working at a bookstore here in Brentwood as the manager. Then ‘e gets some letter from this Duran guy. Really, really upsets ‘im.”

“Any idea why he would contact Darrin?”

Now the liar’s poker had to begin for Rod. Blame it on the dead guy.

“Even though Darrin was a Captain in the Army, and technically this guy’s boss, I think Johnny Duran called the shots. He was a career guy, apparently. A Master Sergeant. I think

something ‘appened to them in the Army. Something that made Darrin feel like ‘e needed to do what Duran told ‘im.”

Choi seemed to be nodding his head in agreement. Might as well lay it out there, Rod thought to himself.

“I mean, you ever hear the story of that Rasputin guy. ‘e was this mystical, evil monk that bewitched the Russian royal family. Duran was kind of creepy like that when I would talk to ‘im on the phone. Then Duran gets killed in New York? I mean, the guy’s not even from there. What are the odds?” Rod asked, rhetorically.

“Did Darrin ever mention receiving a manuscript when he was in Saudi Arabia?”

Might explain all the notes, Rod thought.

“Nope. I don’t recall anything of a manuscript.”

“How about any names of Saudis he might have met there? Did he ever mention someone named Jibril?”

“No, doesn’t sound familiar. ‘e really doesn’t talk much at all about any of that. I think when ‘e was in that coma, ‘e just forgot a lot of stuff. I mean, ‘e didn’t even remember that ‘e was living with me. It was like we were back when we were kids still,” Rod said, exaggerating Darrin’s condition a bit.

“And you’re sure he didn’t give you anything to hold for him? Anything recently?”

“No. Positive.” *Technically, I took the stuff from his room in 1998,* Rod thought to himself. *And the key he has to the storage space is his own business.*

“O.k., well here’s my card,” Agent Choi said. “We may need to talk to you again.”

“And here’s my card, Dr. Warner,” Agent Hogue said smiling.

“Geez. Agin’ sorry mate. If I knew now, what I knew then . . .” Rod said, hoping somebody would stop him from having to complete the sentence.

“I think I understand,” said Agent Hogue.

“O.k. G’day then,” Rod said as let them out the front door.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 68

The air in the storage shed behind the Pico Avenue Assistance Center was heavy with the August afternoon heat. The smell of dust and cardboard brought back memories for Darrin of the summers in high school when he worked the nightshift stocking shelves in the local grocery store. Between that job and working in his parents' restaurant, he was able to save enough money to buy a '78 Olds Cutlass and keep it filled with gas. He liked to come out here during the thirty-minute break he allowed himself after the lunch crowd was gone. He would pull down a couple of cases of water bottles and use them as an ersatz chair.

Although they called it a "storage shed," the building was really the size of a small warehouse. It was large enough to store tens of thousands of cases of water, emergency meals, blankets, and basic medical supplies like bandages and antiseptics. Althea had given him a tour of the property before offering him a job. For all the good the Pico Avenue Assistance Center did, it was the storage shed that convinced Darrin that this is where he should be. Darrin spent the better part of the next three years trying to convince Althea about the importance of emergency preparedness for the poor.

Althea would say, "I'd love to be able to worry about 'what ifs' sweetie, but I've got cold hard reality to deal with every day. I've got mouths to feed, people to clothe. You Midwesterners are always worrying about earthquakes when you move to California. Once you've lived here long enough you learn to keep that in a corner of your mind."

Hurricane Katrina changed all that. "Look at those people," she said to Darrin with tears in her eyes as they watched the footage on CNN of the throngs of newly homeless people in and around the New Orleans Superdome. "The rich ones jump in their SUVs and get out of town. And poor folks stay and die. We've got to do things differently. We need to be ready."

Darrin volunteered to lead up the emergency preparedness effort. He had “found” an anonymous donor willing to match up to a quarter of a million dollars in contributions to the project. Within nine months they had fully stocked the storage shed. The effort had inspired a number of other outreach agencies in the city to follow suit. The mayor had even cited the Pico Avenue Assistance Center as a “shining example of the good that can come out of tragedy.” Of course, the mayor was referring to Hurricane Katrina. Darrin knew that it was a different tragedy – one that had not yet unfolded – that was the real catalyst behind the effort.

He regretted the time he had wasted in his first few years in Los Angeles. He had been sidetracked. If Johnny’s letter hadn’t gotten through to him in Spring of 2001, none of this would have been possible. Darrin was convinced he never would have remembered.

* * *

“Johnny, it’s Darrin Allis,” he said when Johnny answered the phone the morning after Darrin read his letter.

“Chappy? Chappy is that you?” Johnny asked.

“It’s me Sergeant,” he replied.

“I thought you were dead Chappy. Where have you been? I’ve felt like I was all alone on this,” Johnny said, his voice breaking.

“I got hurt in Dar es Salaam. I didn’t remember anything. I’ve just been a fog for three years. Until I got the letter yesterday. The one you sent my parents,” Darrin replied.

“I just can’t believe it. You’re alive! I thought it got you.”

“What have you been doing all this time, Johnny?” Darrin asked.

“Well, I got my 20 years in last fall and I retired from the Army. Glory and I started our own little business here in Oak Park near where her parents live. We hire people out to do temp jobs. You remember Glory was a manager at Kelly Temps when we were at Ft. Riley?”

“Yeah, I remember that. Good for you, Johnny. How’s Glory doing?”

“Oh, you know, not as well as I’d like. We were never able to have babies. I kind of got over that, I guess. But she never did. But we’re doing some foster parent stuff. Just short term kinds of things – a month or two here and there. And we’re thinking of adopting once we get the business going well enough so Glory can take time off.”

“I’m sorry Johnny,” Darrin said.

“Hey, look Chappy, we don’t know for sure that it was Saudi that did it,” Johnny replied. “Lot’s of people have a hard time getting pregnant.”

“I know. I wish there was a way that Glory knew it wasn’t her fault or something she did,” Darrin said, fishing.

“Yeah, well, I think she’s o.k., you know?” Johnny replied evasively.

“Did you tell her Johnny?” Darrin asked point blank.

The phone line was silent.

“Johnny?” Darrin asked.

“I had to Chappy. I had to. You can’t keep it buried down inside of you. I tried. But with Hennessey dead and me thinking you were dead, I was the loneliest man in the world. She knew there was something I wasn’t telling her. She thought I was having an affair or something. She thought it was her fault.”

“How much does she know, Johnny?”

“Everything.”

“And she knows why? You told her why we even know this stuff? You told her we’re all alone?”

“Yeah.”

Darrin sighed. They would come back to this point again, but now was not the time.

“I’m sorry Chappy. You’ll understand one day. One day you’ll find somebody you love and trust.”

“We’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do here, Johnny.”

“You saw in my letter that the Cole bombing happened on the date last year. ‘Attacking a ship of the greater son in their own land,’ so I guess that makes sense.”

“Did you try to warn anybody?”

“I thought about it, Chappy. But the stuff is so vague. That could have happened anywhere in the entire Arab Peninsula. What good would it do? You think the Navy is going to keep all it’s ships out at sea? Plus, after seeing what happened in Nairobi. That wasn’t supposed to happen, Chappy.”

“I know.”

“Chappy, I think we are responsible for killing those people. It was only supposed to be Tanzania. We made it worse.”

“A lot worse,” Darrin replied.

“You know they wanted to do the same thing in Uganda, but it failed.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Maybe if I had actually stopped the truck in Dar es Salaam, Uganda would have happened.”

“Chappy, we’re damned if we do, damned if we don’t. Aren’t we?”

“I think that pretty well sums it up, Johnny. So what’s the next date again?”

“September 11th. North Tower of the World Trade Center. Same place as the 1993 attack. What are we gonna’ do Chappy?”

“We didn’t do anything in 1993. We thought the great city on the western sea was Los Angeles,” Darrin said, recalling the mistake.

“And six people died. Over a 1,000 were hurt.”

“Seems like the body count is lower when we don’t get involved. We spent months trying to figure out how to stop Tanzania.”

“And two years figuring out it would be Tanzania,” Johnny added.

“And how many died in Dar es Salaam – 11? And then another 200 or more in Nairobi?”

“So you’re saying we should just stand by and do nothing if we know something is going to happen?”

“No, I’m not saying that Johnny,” Darrin replied. I’m thinking it though, he said to himself. “I’m just saying that if we’re not careful about this, a whole lot more people could get killed again.”

“I guess we’ve got five months to try to figure something out,” Johnny said.

“Johnny,” Darrin said.

“Yeah, Chappy?”

“How’d we get here? Why us?”

“I ask myself the same question every morning,” Johnny replied. “I have for the last eight years. But we made a promise to each other after Hennessey died that we would do whatever we could to help our country. I haven’t forgotten that.”

“I know you haven’t Johnny. Thanks.”

* * *

“I’m trying to keep the promise Johnny,” Darrin said to the stacks of water bottles and supplies. “God, I miss you old friend.”

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