

## Chapter 69

Ibrahim's misstep – calling Jibril by the name “Mustafa” – resulted in the two moving to another safe house, this one an apartment in Anaheim. As they drove past Disneyland, hundreds of families were making their way from the theme park to the parking lot. “Next stop, the Pluto Parking Lot D,” Jibril heard the tram driver say over his loudspeaker. For all the wealth the American families enjoyed, he did not see happiness on the faces of those leaving park. Instead, he saw crying babies, spoiled children, and tired parents. *This was the enemy?* he thought. *No, these families were the ones who, through apathy, enabled the enemy – the United States government.* That is how he had to look at it to justify what they would do.

It did make Jibril think of his own family. His days as a youngster in Jedda. His own parents and brothers. He missed them.

For all of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's flaws, and Jibril al-Attas had them catalogued in his own mind, he was able to inspire loyalty among his family. The lead conspirator in the World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef, was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's nephew. With a little financing (reportedly less than \$1,000) and direction (inspired by Jibril al-Attas, of course), Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had watched as Ramzi Yousef put his group together from followers of a blind cleric from Jersey City, New Jersey -- Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman. After being expelled from Egypt in the 1980s, Abdel-Rahman had fought alongside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan before coming to America.

They were able to pull a Ryder van into the parking structure under the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Their plan was to obliterate the foundation of the North Tower, causing it to collapse onto the South Tower. Jibril al-Attas knew that was unlikely to happen. Darrin Allis's notes said nothing of the South Tower. But what did happen – the detonation of 1,500

pounds of nitrate fertilizer and fuel oil at 12:17 p.m. on February 26, 1993 that killed six and injured 1,042 people – was the opening salvo of the war between what the scroll described as the “Lions of the Sons of Ishmael” and the “Greater Son of Tarshish.”

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For his part, Jibril al-Attas was never able to convince his immediate family to help in the struggle. His father had died when Jibril was a teenager and his eldest brother, Mahmoud, was the leader of the family. “Brother, if I hear any more of this talk of jihad, there will be serious consequences to you. Osama has been banished from our country – isn’t that enough of a lesson for you?” Mahmoud asked Jibril. “If a bin Laden can have his citizenship stripped of him, what do you think will happen to an al-Attas?”

“Brother, how can you look around and see the injustice in the world and not want to do something about it?” Jibril asked.

“Because the injustice has gone on from the beginning of time my young brother. You will not change it by throwing away your life. Now get back to your wives and work hard and raise a family.”

“I am ashamed to be your brother, Mahmoud. Osama is our brother. I will die with him if that is God’s will.”

“His father used our mother like a whore. Now, like his father, Osama wants to use you, my brother, the same way. He doesn’t care for you. Just like his father did not care for our mother. He has a need and you are simply there to fulfill it. His need isn’t intercourse with a young virgin, though, it is power.”

Jibril angrily raised his hand to his brother and then stopped. As he lowered his hand, he said, “I will not give in to Satan as you have Mahmoud.”

“Leave now, Jibril. I never want to see you again. If you cause trouble for this family, I will make sure the King’s police track you down and bring you to justice – real justice.”

\* \* \*

Jibril took some pride in that fact he didn’t hate his older brother. He concluded his brother was just blinded. Mahmoud would see the light one day. And Jibril would accept him back. Jibril would need all the family he could get when, one day, he would rule a united Arabian Peninsula that would forever be rid of the House of Saud.

ONLINE VERSION

## **Chapter 70**

“O.k., let’s run through this quickly, Randi,” Director Moran said. “It’s Friday afternoon and I’m sure everybody’s got things to do and places to go.”

Jimmy Moran used to love Fridays. But since he usually worked six or seven days a week now with the L.A. Office Director position, they were more like Wednesdays or Thursdays to him. He figured it would be best to get his counter-terrorism team together on Friday afternoon so agents could keep momentum on their assignments through the weekend and on into Monday morning.

“O.k.,” Agent Socia replied. “Here goes.”

“Agents out of our Manhattan office interviewed Sean Hennessey’s mother. She hasn’t spoken to Darrin Allis in years, but still thinks very highly of him. He was really helpful taking care of things after Hennessey died. Apparently, Hennessey did have a drug problem. She said they did find cocaine in his system after he committed suicide. We got the police report, and it confirms the same thing. Not much more detail there.”

“You think there’s anything else there?” Moran asked.

“You know, her kid’s been dead a long time. Sounds like she buried him and moved on. She did say somebody called her a while back asking about him, and some claim he filed about Gulf War Syndrome or something. She just told them, ‘Sorry, my son’s been dead for thirteen years.’ That’s about all from her.”

“And how about Johnny Duran’s family?” asked Agent Choi.

“Agents from the Chicago office have been handling that one. Duran apparently didn’t have any kids. His parents died a long time ago. There’s his wife, Gloria, or Glory as her family calls her, but she’s in a mental facility. Her parents, Roberto and Rosa Sanchez, think Darrin

Allis is a living saint. Get this, he apparently sends them a check for five grand every month to take care of Gloria. She still gets insurance payments through the Army because her husband retired with twenty years in, but it doesn't cover everything."

"Where's he get \$5,000 a month to send her?" Agent Claussen asked.

Carl Barrett raised his hand, "Oh! Oh! I know, I know!"

Moran ignored him.

"So what does his wife say? Did the field agents talk to her?" Moran asked.

"She doesn't say much it seems. Hasn't been coherent for five years now," Agent Socia said.

"O.k. How about incoherent things. Does she say anything?"

"You don't even get that until you mention Darrin Allis's name. Then she just starts rocking back and forth saying 'He left, he left, he left, he left' louder and louder and louder. Until the orderlies come and jam a needle full of sedatives into her arm."

"Who left?" Agent Robles asked.

"I don't know. Her husband I guess."

"Do her parents know what she means?"

"They just say she went catatonic on 9/11. Sounds like Darrin Allis pulled up with her husband's body in the back seat in a Yellow Cab."

"My God. Why would he do that?"

"Duty first. That's what he told Mr. Sanchez later. He promised Gloria he would go and get her husband and bring him back. He found Duran at the bottom of the North Tower of the World Trade Center and brought him home to his wife."

"Just like he promised."

“Yep, just like he promised.”

“What else did they say about Johnny Duran?”

“He had retired from the Army the previous year, September of 2000. He and the wife had tried to have kids forever. A lot of miscarriages.”

“How awful. They never adopted?”

“No. Her parents did say that they had really changed over the years before Duran’s death. Said Duran and his wife used to be pretty religious. Stopped going to church though several years before.”

“I get the sense that Darrin Allis isn’t too religious anymore either,” Moran observed. “Makes you wonder with all these guys having chaplain or chaplain assistant jobs in the military, you know? Committing suicide, leaving the church. What happened to these three guys?”

“Also makes you wonder why we’re spending tax dollars on supporting religion in the armed forces,” Agent Claussen interjected.

“We’ve lined up an interview with one of Allis’s professors from the seminary. Supposedly they’ve kept in touch over the years. Some British guy – Bixby. We’ll see what he has to say,” Randi Socia said.

“Where is he again, in Great Britain?” Agent al-Jafari asked.

“No, no. Austin, Texas. That’s where Darrin Allis went to seminary.”

“O.k. Carl, now it’s your turn. What have you found?” Moran asked.

Agent Barrett sat smiling like a cat who had eaten a canary. “Oh, me. Well, nothing much.”

“All right, all right, students, Carl has something to say,” Moran said like a fifth grade teacher. “Mr. Barrett, can you share with the class what you discovered?”

“Well, it turns out our soup kitchen worker has a stream of money that comes to him every month. It looks like about \$5,000 -- give or take a few dollars.”

“Well, that explains how he’s covering his rent. Where’s the money come from?” asked Moran.

“A couple of trust accounts. One of them Darrin Allis set up in 2001. Looks like he’s been frugal with his savings. A few pennies here, a few there, it really adds up I guess. So now he has close to five million dollars in a brokerage account tied to the trust he controls.”

“Holy Christ!” Moran exclaimed.

“No way!” Agent Socia said. “Where did it come from?”

“I’ve got a couple of forensic accountants working on it now. There getting records for the last six years, which is as far back as they go.”

“Did you check it through SWIFT?” Agent Choi asked.

“That didn’t turn up anything. Looks like wherever it came from it was inside the United States,” Barrett replied. “He’s also got another trust account he’s controlling that has close to a million dollars in it. Looks like he uses that one for Mrs. Duran.”

“Nobody does this kind of thing in secret. Somebody else must be in on this. How about the interviews with Scott Greenbaum and this Warner friend of his?” Moran asked Agents Choi, Claussen, and Hogue.

“Dr. Greenbaum didn’t do much other than confirm that Darrin Allis was injured in Dar es Salaam. And he said he took Rod Warner with him.”

“Warner was a little more talkative,” Agent Hogue said.

“Yeah, but he seemed pretty smooth – too smooth. An Australian accent, but the guy is from Indiana. Strange,” Agent Choi said. “He was intentionally trying to lead us to think that Johnny Duran was the ringleader of some little cult. Called him a Rasputin.”

“Did he give any reasons for that?”

“Yeah, he said Johnny Duran would call Darrin Allis and get him worked up over things. Warner says Allis didn’t really want to be involved with Duran,” Agent Choi said.

“And he also showed us a letter that the State Department had written to Darrin thanking him for his concerns about embassy security but telling him to buzz off. It’s dated early summer of 1998, before the Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya,” Agent Hogue added.

“Well, that kind of supports your original theory Cecil, that Darrin Allis was there to try to stop the bombing. Lauri, any thoughts?” Moran asked FBI psychologist Laura Wentz.

“As I said the other day, could be a hero thing – Fireman’s complex. Or guilt, thought it wasn’t right to bomb the Embassy without a warning. It’s also what al Qaeda usually does – they give a warning before each attack,” Wentz responded.

“Does anybody have any type of unifying theory here for why three of America’s finest all go down the wrong path?”

“Assuming that they weren’t trying to help,” Agent Hogue added.

“Look Cecil, if they thought there were going to be attacks, they should have picked up the phone and called somebody,” Moran said.

“Maybe they tried.”

“I guess I disagree with Laurie. You might have one psychotic individual who has a savior complex or whatever it is,” Agent Socia said.

“Fireman’s complex,” Dr. Wentz said, correcting her.

“O.k., but three of them with the same complex? No, with three of these guys, you’ve got to go with one of the standard reasons – money, power, or religion,” said Socia.

“A couple days ago, my gut told me religion,” Barrett said. “But with assets under management of close to six million dollars, I think the money’s coming up as a big motivator for Darrin Allis. Maybe it started out as religion, but I think it’s become a lot more than that,” he said.

“My sense is that something happened to these guys over in Saudi Arabia. And it had to do with Jibril. I don’t think you can turn three soldiers into terrorist sympathizers willingly,” Agent Choi theorized.

“So what are you saying Ron, that these guys got brain-washed by the Saudis?” asked Director Moran.

“Like the Manchurian Candidate?” asked Agent Robles.

“Yeah, something like that,” responded Agent Choi. “Then they do the jobs they were assigned and their mission ends.”

“Yeah, permanently it looks like,” responded Moran.

“I disagree with Ron. I think this was voluntary. And I think it’s about religion,” asserted Agent Claussen.

“Let’s hear it, Gene,” Moran said.

“I think these three guys all believed in an ‘end of days’ type of scenario. Most of your fundamentalist Protestants – Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals -- do these days. But I think these guys were men of action. They weren’t satisfied to let the world limp along. They wanted to put things on the fast track. And they got to know some Islamic fundamentalists who shared their views.”

“Interesting Gene. Where’s this come from? You watching Sunday morning sermons on T.V. now?” asked Agent Socia.

“It’s hard to escape. You see this ‘rapture’ stuff all over the place now. Books, movies. Hell, even bumper stickers. I was reading an article last week about some guy in Alabama who’s trying to breed cattle so that he can get a red heifer.”

“Come again?” asked Moran.

“In the end times, supposedly, the Jews will return to Israel, their Temple will be restored, and they will sacrifice a red heifer. Problem is, there aren’t any red heifers in existence in the world.”

“So this guy in Alabama is trying to make a red heifer?”

“Yeah, so that the prophecy can be fulfilled and the end can come.”

“That guy wasn’t the first. I remember back in late 1999 there were also fears that some wackos were going to bring on the end by bombing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on the eve of the Millennium,” added Agent Robles

“And how’s that play out with Darrin Allis?”

“Just like the guys who wanted to bomb the Temple Mount, I think he and his buddies were trying to bring about a conflict that will lead us to ‘Armageddon.’ Stoking up a fight between Muslims and the West. I mean, look at the guy’s background. He went to a fundamentalist school in Texas that teaches all about that,” Claussen responded.

“I suppose if somebody wanted to hasten ‘the end’ then working with al Qaeda might seem like a good approach.”

“And where would a good Christian fundamentalist ever cross paths with al Qaeda?” Claussen asked.

“In Saudi Arabia. During the Gulf War,” Agent Socia said nodding.

“Jeez, the world would be better off if we had a bunch of Buddhists, like my partner Ron, here,” Agent Barrett commented.

“Actually, I’m a Presbyterian, Carl,” Choi said, correcting him.

Everyone sat uncomfortably for a moment without saying anything.

“So, Carl, you still think the McVeigh angle is relevant here?” Director Moran asked Barrett, trying to change the subject.

“That was my gut, yeah. I don’t know if we would be able to ever prove it. But what are the chances that two guys in the same Army division both end up tied up in terrorist acts?” Barrett asked rhetorically.

“Maybe McVeigh got brainwashed too,” Robles theorized. “There was supposedly a ‘third man’ with McVeigh and Terry Nichols when they rented the Ryder truck they used to blow up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Maybe that third guy was an al Qaeda handler?”

“O.k., let’s keep working on this. Carl, we need the info on those trust funds for our next interview with Allis.”

“Hopefully, we’ll have it by Monday.”

“Randi, when will you be able to pull in the rest of the interview results?”

“Probably that timeframe.”

“O.k., let’s plan to pick him up Tuesday afternoon,” Moran said.

“You mean evening, right?” asked Agent Socia. “Remember, he usually works until 7:30 at night.”

“No, afternoon will be fine. It will let him know we mean business now,” Moran said.

“But I thought his boss . . .,” Socia began to ask, looking for guidance.

“The cat’s out of the bag on that one I guess. We’ve been instructed by the U.S. Attorney’s office to do everything the way we would normally do it. So go ahead and pull him out of work.”

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## Chapter 71

Stacy didn't usually spend a lot of time in front of the mirror trying on different outfits. She always figured that her first instinct was the best. But tonight with Darrin would be special. She had some information to pry out, so she needed the right combination. She'd go with what Tina had described as her "J-Lo" dress: a black silk Michael Kors dress with a plunging neckline that came to a "V" at a line almost to the bottom of her "Full C-Cup" breasts. She was 31 years old now. She knew that time and gravity might not allow her to go bra-less much longer without a visit to "Dr. 90210." For now, though, she would enjoy being able to go out wearing just a dress with a thong underneath.

For footwear, she'd go with her Minolo Blahnik Sedaras. The salesman told her she could dance in them, but she was suspicious about that, what with a four-inch heel. But she couldn't resist how they added even more definition to her sculpted calves.

The doorbell rang as she was just finishing her mascara – the "raccoon look" as Darrin called it. She had concluded long ago that men generally walked through life in a fog. They didn't notice a woman's make-up until she didn't wear it. Stacy was lucky she could usually get away with a little powder and lip gloss.

Darrin's eyebrows raised and his jaw dropped when Stacy opened the front door to her condo. "Wow!" was the only comment he could muster.

"You like it?"

"It. Them. Yeah," he said very honestly.

"Eyes up here mister," she joked. "Let's take my car. For a little kiss I'll even let you drive."

He obliged. He loved the taste and feel of her lips. They were warm. But they also had substance to them. No mushy kisses. There was strength underneath the softness.

She tossed him the keys as they walked out the front door. She had let him drive her Z-3 before, but it was hard not to comment on his driving when he got a little too close to other cars. “Careful Tiger, this is literally one of the last Z-3s that BMW made in 2002. It’ll be a collectors’ item one day if you don’t total it.”

“I’m not even close to his back bumper,” he responded defensively.

“Maybe it just looks like it from the passenger seat,” she said as she felt herself pushing down on a brake that wasn’t there.

“I’m gonna take Sunset over to Coldwater Canyon and get to the Valley that way. The 405 will be a nightmare on a Friday night.”

“Whatever you think,” she said happily. Less chance of dents she thought.

As they passed through Bel-Air on Sunset Boulevard, Stacy couldn’t resist beginning her probe of Darrin’s finances. “Wow, look at those houses up there. How much do you think one of those would run?”

“I don’t know. Four, maybe five million,” he responded.

“Where do you suppose someone would get the money to buy a house like that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Rich parents?” he asked, turning to look at her. In two months of dating they hadn’t really discussed finances. It occurred to Stacy that Rod had probably educated Darrin about her family’s wealth. She felt like the tables might get turned on her.

“Maybe. But say somebody had nice, middle-class parents. And he wasn’t an actor or an athlete,” she continued.

“Or a retired motocross star, like Rod?”

“No, nothing like that. How could a person afford that?”

“Well, they could be good in business. Or maybe they won the lottery.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just wonder where people get all this money from,” she said disingenuously.

He just shrugged without adding more.

As they wound past UCLA and then up Coldwater Canyon she noticed he slowed down a bit around the curves.

“You know, you can go 55 through here with this car.”

“It’s o.k. I don’t know the curves well enough yet.”

“Hmmm. If you look over here for a second I’ll show you some curves you know a little better,” she teased.

He did a quick side-glance and smiled when he saw she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Which is it, huh? One minute you don’t want me to wreck the car, the next minute you’re going Janet Jackson on me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That was a wardrobe malfunction,” she laughed. “Speaking of which, did you see pictures of Tara Reid when her dress slipped down on the red carpet at the Oscars?”

“Heard about it, but only saw the blurred out shot,” he responded.

“God, some Beverly Hills doctor butchered her. She’s my age! What’s she doing that plastic surgery stuff for?”

“I don’t know. Not something you’re going to have to worry about, right?”

“Hope not.”

As they pulled up to Ventura Boulevard, he asked, “Which way, right or left?”

“Shit if I know. Why don’t we turn right and if we don’t see it we’ll turn around.”

“O.k.”

Thus began a half-hour quest back and forth on Ventura Boulevard trying to find a hip new restaurant known only by the symbol “&”.

“I thought you’ve been here before?” he finally asked with a tone of frustration.

“Yeah, but I didn’t drive. I don’t pay attention when I don’t drive. I know you can’t see the sign from the street.”

“What? I’ve been looking for a sign with the “And” symbol on it and there’s no sign?”

“No, I told you that the other day. There’s just a valet stand out front.”

“Don’t remember you saying that.”

“Well, I did.”

“Why don’t you call 411.”

“O.k.,” she said dialing her cell phone. “Yeah, Los Angeles.”

“No, it’s Studio City.”

“Whatever, sssshhh,” she said.

“Yes, it’s a restaurant called ahhh, that “And” symbol. No, not the word “and”. Can you put in that “And” symbol. I don’t know what it’s called. The “And” symbol. Don’t you have a keyboard in front of you? It’s on the top row. Like above the 6 or 7 key. Yeah, that one.”

“It’s called an ‘ampersand,’” Darrin yelled.

“What?”

“An ampersand. Tell her it’s an ampersand.”

“Nothing there huh?”

“Have her look up the word ‘ampersand,’” he urged again.

“O.k. O.k. Can you look up the word ‘ampersand’ for me?”

“No. Ampersand. A-M-P-E-R-S-A-N-D,” she said spelling it out.

He just shook his head. “Make sure she checks Studio City.”

“O.k., and you tried that for Studio City or Los Angeles? No, I need you to look it up for Studio City too I guess. Still nothing? O.k.,” she said, hanging up shaking her head.

“Is that it over there? That looks like a valet stand,” he said pointing to the other side of the street. “I’m going to whip a U.”

“Not in the middle of Ventura Boulevard you aren’t. Go up to the light.”

“We’re fifteen minutes late already. No guts, no glory,” he said laughing as he threaded his way across the turning lane and through oncoming traffic.

“Darrin!!!” she screamed over the cacophony of car horns.

“Whoaa, that was close!” he said, feeling exhilarated.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she said, slapping him across the chest with her left palm.

“I do believe the girls are standing at attention!” he quipped, reaching over to her breasts with his right hand.

“It’s because you’ve traumatized them!”

They pulled up to the valet stand.

“Good evening, sir. Dining with us tonight?”

“Depends. Is this the ‘and sign’ restaurant?” he asked with a smile.

“Yes. But it’s called an ‘ampersand,’” the valet corrected.

“A real couple of wise asses, huh?” Stacy yelled from across the car.

“Well done,” Darrin said to the valet, slipping him a ten. “Take good care of it.”

The valet nodded and drove off.

“After you,” Darrin said, opening the door of “&” to Stacy.

“Hi, do you have a reservation for two for Lawson at 8:30?” Stacy asked the hostess.

“Hmmm. Just gave that one away. You should call next time if you’re going to be late,” the hostess said without looking up.

“Yeah, we tried,” Stacy began sarcastically, “turns out that the “&” sign doesn’t work so well when you do a 411.”

“You called to make the reservation, right,” the hostess shot back.

“I had the number from a magazine, but I didn’t bring it with . . .,” Stacy paused. This wasn’t starting well. *This woman’s a bitch. And I’m starving,* she thought. *Let the bitch assume the superior position if it’s going to make her feel better. Put your tail between your legs.*

“You know, you’re absolutely right. It’s my fault. Is there anything you can you do to help us?”

“Well, we had you down for a table on the patio and it was a lot better. I do have a table back near the kitchen, but people don’t like it sometimes . . .,” the hostess said.

Stacy looked at Darrin, who mouthed “Whatever.”

“O.k., we’ll take it. Thanks so . . .,” Stacy stopped herself before launching into more sarcasm. “Thanks.”

“Geez,” Darrin said after they were seated. “I thought there was going to be a catfight.”

“I get it a lot for some reason,” Stacy replied. “I think it’s an evolutionary thing. Every pack has the she-wolf. When you set foot on another pack’s turf, you submit to the she-wolf of the pack. If you don’t . . .”

“You get chased off,” Darrin said, completing her sentence.

“I was going to say you get your throat ripped out, but that’s a nicer way to put it. So, with that, what are we going to eat tonight?” Stacy giggled.

They ended up ordering the same thing – broiled scallops on pumpkin risotto, with a nice Pinot Noir from the Santa Ynez Valley. They started talking about their pasts, and the conversation started to take a spiritual turn.

“So, when you were a minister, did God ever talk to you?”

“That’s an interesting question for you to ask. Did God ever talk to me? No, not really,” Darrin replied. “There was this time I thought He did. But it was silly.”

“No, go ahead and tell me,” she begged.

“Well, I was in my second year of Bible college and I thought God was telling me I needed to talk to John Mellencamp.”

“That singer guy?”

“What do you mean, ‘That singer guy’? He’s only the best rock and roller to come out of Indiana. Well, besides the Jacksons, but they were from Gary. That’s really like Chicago.”

“So what did God want you to tell John Mellencamp?”

“Well, first of all, it wasn’t like I heard a voice. It was just a really strong feeling that I had to tell him that God loved him and wanted him to accept Jesus Christ as his savior.”

“Wow. So did you talk to him.”

“No. He wasn’t home.”

“So maybe God didn’t know his schedule,” Stacy said smiling.

“Or maybe I was just deluded.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Maybe there was some other reason for you to try.”

Darrin shrugged. *Yeah, to teach me how it feels to get booked and put in jail,* he thought.

“How about you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, God talked to me. But it wasn’t just a feeling. It was a voice. I heard it just like I’m hearing your voice.”

“And what did the voice tell you?”

“To stop sleeping with somebody.”

“Uhh, you didn’t hear this voice recently, right? I mean, it’s not me?”

“No, no. But you were probably part of the reason I heard the voice.”

“Oookayyyy.”

“Remember that night we met the first time. We were talking in your room about Will Smith and him being such a good guy? I don’t know, it just kind of struck me. You know? How would people look at me? Would they think I was a good person? Then it started bugging me. So I was working on a photo shoot for a kid’s magazine. I met this woman who was a Mormon. She had a couple of really sweet kids and a nice husband. We got to know each other and she invited me to her church.”

“Wow, the Baptists wouldn’t like to hear that I converted you to being a Morman!”

“I was really impressed with how nice everybody was. And how dedicated they were. And how there was a special program for everybody who came to the church. There was enough going on that you could go to church five nights a week.”

“And that’s when you heard the voice?”

“Yes, I’d been going there for a little while and I got baptized and everything. And I would stand there in church and get this warm feeling inside. I loved that warm feeling.

Meanwhile, I was in a relationship with a guy who wasn't religious at all. And I just heard a voice one day, clear as a bell. 'Stop sleeping with him.' And I broke up with him that evening."

"So what happened with being a Mormon?"

"Well, everybody talked about how they had a calling all the time."

"And? What was yours?"

She looked down, a little embarrassed.

"Nobody ever told me I had one. Anyway, I got bored. I moved on to other things. And I didn't like the idea of giving 10 percent of my income to the church."

"So what did you think about all that Joseph Smith and the tablets story?"

"I thought it was interesting. It seemed to fill in what God or Jesus was up to for the last couple thousand years," she shrugged.

"They ever tell you the story of Tarrying John?"

"Terry and Don? As in Rod's cousin and her husband? I just love how they gave their three kids racing names! Dash, 'Resa, and Chase! So cute."

"No, no. Not Terry and Don. Tarrying John. Tarrying as in 'waiting around.' The Mormons believe that John, one of the twelve apostles, never died. They think he's still walking around today."

"No, that must have been the advanced class. Ehhh, there's a lot of weird stuff as I look back. But the experience – I still think it was positive. I understand why people decide to be Mormon."

Darrin noticed Stacy look over his shoulder and smile.

"Hi Rich. Hi Tony," she said as she started to get up.

Darrin rolled his eyes. *Not tonight*, he thought. These were two of Stacy's old party buddies. He suspected they and Stacy may have been more than that.

Each took turns hugging Stacy and kissing her on the lips. "Hmmm, hmmm, I love that dress Stace," Rich drooled.

"God, lookin' at you is like lookin' at a race car!" Tony added.

"Hey guys, what's up?" Darrin said, trying to be cool.

"Hey," they both said back in unison, neither making eye contact with Darrin.

"Hey, we're grabbing a bite to eat before we head over to Spoonful. Great band tonight. You wanna come over and dance?" Rich asked Stacy.

She glanced at Darrin and saw the scowl on his face.

"No, we're just having a quiet night out. Thanks though."

"Suit yourself, but if you wanna have some fun we'll be there until 1 or 2 in the morning," Tony said, rubbing Stacy's upper arm.

"O.k., see you guys."

They both walked away without saying anything else to Darrin.

The server came by. "How was your dinner this evening. Any room for dessert?"

"I don't know, you want anything?" Darrin asked Stacy.

"I thought we were going to have the flourless chocolate cake?"

"That's fine. I'm kind of full," Darrin replied.

*Great. Now he's going to be a baby*, she thought.

"How about the chocolate cake to go," she said to the server.

"Sure thing."

She wasn't used to seeing Darrin like this.

“Come on, it’s just Rich and Tony. They’re not that bad.”

His eyebrows shot upward and his forehead wrinkled.

“Not that bad?” he said, shaking his head.

“I’ve known them a long time.”

“Yeah, that’s what I hear.”

“What you hear? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say I know the backstory there.”

“Look, Darrin, I had a life before I met you. I’m not like your ex-wife. Some little, small town virgin.”

*She obviously didn’t know Becky*, he thought.

“How long am I going to have to have them in my life?”

“Whooooaaa mister. Let’s try that again. Do you get to decide who my friends are? I don’t just ditch people I’ve known for a long time.”

“No, I don’t get to choose,” he responded. “You do. Choose wisely.”

“You’re being a little too sanctimonious, Reverend.”

He looked away as he flicked the back of his hand toward her.

“What’s that? I’m dismissed with a wave of the hand now?” she asked leaning forward, shooting him daggers.

“Not dismissing you, just seems stupid arguing about them.”

“Sometimes I think I know you,” she said shaking her head but keeping her eyes locked on his. “But I don’t. And this is only the tip of the iceberg.”

“Cut me a break! Two assholes come over here and disrespect me and now I’m the one with the problem?”

“Tell me about the money, Darrin,” she said in hushed tone.

“What?”

“Tell me about the money you’ve got in those accounts. Tell me what you’re doing with it. Tell me who this Sanchez is you send money to.”

“How? Where?” he sputtered.

“You want me to deal with my shit for you, let’s deal with yours first.”

*Take that*, she thought.

“It’s none of your business. I don’t ask you about your money.”

“You want me to choose my friends, but you can’t come clean with why you have four million bucks and live in a shithole apartment.”

Darrin took a deep breath. He could feel the anger welling up. He felt betrayed. *Was it Rod? You told Tina, didn’t you Rod?* He sat quietly, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

The server came by and dropped off the check. He could tell by Darrin’s face that a nice tip might be in jeopardy. “Take your time. Whenever you’re ready.”

After the server walked away, Darrin said, “I’m not going to talk about this here.”

“Not a problem,” Stacy replied. “We’ve got a long ride home.”

He pulled two, crisp Ben Franklin’s out of his wallet to settle up the bill.

“Ready?”

“I guess so,” she said.

## Chapter 72

The ride to Stacy's condo started silently.

"You mind if I play some music?" she asked.

"It's fine," he mumbled, staring straight ahead at the winding canyon road.

She needed to fix this. But she wasn't going to apologize. He'd been a real shit about Rich and Tony. She decided to turn it over to a higher power.

She switched the CD player to Van Morrison.

As the music came up he exhaled from his nose and wagged his head slightly.

♪ *I've been searching a long time*

*For someone exactly like you* ♪

She could see his jaw unclench a little.

♪ *I've been traveling all around the world*

*Waiting for you to come through* ♪

As the song played on, she knew he understood. There were always going to be problems. Rough spots. It wasn't going to change the basic facts. They were meant for each other.

♪ *I've been carryin my heavy load*

*Waiting for the light to come*

*Shining through.* ♪

As the song ended, he pulled in an overlook just before Mullholland Drive. He turned off the car and hit the parking brake. The city lights glowed beneath them. They sat for ten minutes without a word.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said with tears in his eyes. “The thought of you with . . .,” he trailed off.

She reached over and ran her fingers through his hair. “Remember what you sang to me that night at Rod and Tina’s anniversary party? ‘There is no past, only future.’”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

“What’s it gonna be, Darrin? Future or past?”

He looked straight ahead.

“Future. Definitely future,” he nodded.

“Good.”

He turned to her, “And that’s when I’ll be able to answer your questions.”

His eyes said it all. She sensed fear there, but then calm. As if there was something he’d made peace with. He wasn’t going to talk. But at least she got it out there. At least he knew what the reason would be if she walked away some day.

“I can wait,” she whispered. “Let’s go.”

When they got to her condo, they went straight to the bedroom. The evening, the fight, the talk; it was all foreplay it turned out. And it worked.

As Darrin held her afterward, neither of them said another word that night. They drifted off to sleep together.

He dreamed again about water. He and Stacy were alone in a large, wooden rowboat just off the Santa Monica Pier. They were drinking wine and laughing. Then the wave came. Stacy had a look of fear in her eyes as tons of water came crashing down on top of them. And she was gone. He tried to yell for her, but there was no sound. Just silence as he and the rowboat sank to the bottom of the Santa Monica Bay.

He forced himself to wake up. Stacy was next to him, still asleep. *My beautiful girl*, he thought. As he quietly put his clothes on, he thought about Becky. They had never experienced what he and Stacy had last night. Maybe they were too young? Too stressed? Who knows? But they didn't have a connection like this.

Even better than making love, though, was hearing her say it. "I love you." He had to get her out of L.A.

He left Stacy's condo in search of another of her passions. The soy chai latte at Starbucks. The line was already long. A short, nasally sounding guy at the front of the line was asking the barista far too many questions about the sugar content of the various drink choices. *Come on, man*, he thought.

He finally got to place their orders and sipped his decaf coffee as he waited for her soy chai. It took him two seconds to recognize that the nasally guy waiting for drinks next to him was Dustin Hoffman. *That's Brentwood for you*, he thought to himself. As the Oscar-winning actor balanced his collection of drinks in a "to go" container and headed for the door, a paparazzi got up from a seat near the bathroom and followed him out. *Now that's really Brentwood*, Darrin concluded.

Stacy was in the shower when he got back. He liked to stand there and watch her sometimes as she would shower after a bike ride. She had this routine. She started from the top of her head down. Hair, face, body. He liked to watch her wash herself down there. She was so careful. Not grab and polish like him. Eyes closed, she slowly – to him, erotically – washed herself.

She was startled when she opened her eyes and saw him there. "Jesus, Darrin."

"Sorry. I got you a soy chai."

She grabbed a towel and dried off. “Brrr. Is the air conditioning on?”

He didn’t respond.

“You turned up the air, didn’t you? I’m freezing!”

“You know I can’t pass up an opportunity to see your nipples stand at attention.”

“Glad you’re enjoying it. Give me my latte.”

He teasingly held the drink out of her arm’s reach.

“What, no kiss first? You use up a boy, and then no kiss?”

“Hey, I’m the one who woke up alone.”

“Good point. I wasn’t even going to come back but I forgot my wallet.”

“Liar!” she giggled as she dropped her towel and pressed her wet body against him.

“Now I’m all wet!”

“Good, try sleeping like that all night! God must be a man. Life’s not fair that way.”

“You got me there. Here, have your latte.”

“Mmmm. That’s some good stuff,” she said after a couple of sips. “Darrin.”

“Yes.”

“I was a little afraid you might not come back.”

“Seriously?”

“I dropped the L-bomb on you last night.”

“Yeah, I remember something like that. But does it count when you say it then?”

“When?”

“You know, in the middle of making love.”

She smiled.

“Darrin Allis, are you going to break my heart?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“This stuff you won’t talk about. Is it going to hurt . . . us? I mean, when you tell me?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“How about ‘No’,” she said as she put her head against his chest. “It’s simple. No. It’s what I want to hear.”

“I can promise you that I will never hurt you on purpose. I will do whatever I can to protect you. You’ve gotta trust me on that.”

She looked in his eyes. She felt peace. Like the shower she had just taken, but on the inside.

“I do. I do trust you. Trust me too, o.k.?”

“O.k.,” he said, looking away.

She knew she had screwed up confronting him about the money. *Goddam Tina. Why’d she have to tell me? Thanks a lot.* They were going to Rod and Tina’s for a swim and steaks on the grill. Hopefully, Tina wouldn’t press the issue.

“Hey, why don’t you finish getting dressed,” he suggested. “I need to touch base with my sister Jane. She left me a message yesterday,” he told her, lying.

He excused himself to the kitchen to call his sister. He waited to hear Stacy start her hairdryer before he dialed her number on his cellphone. He was fortunate to have a sister who was a travel agent. It kept him from having to screw around with booking his own flights.

“Hey little brother, you sure you want to spring for two tickets without at least a 14 day advance? That’s gonna be pretty pricey,” Jane warned.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Can you or Phil pick us up at the airport?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait to meet this L.A. doll. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

“Tell me she’s not like the last one.”

“Nothing like the last one.”

“You know, I actually saw Bi-otchy Becky at Wal-Mart a few weeks ago. She was there with her husband and that ugly kid of theirs.”

“Come on Jane.”

“What? I can’t hold a grudge? That’s my right as a sister.”

He heard the hair dryer shut off.

“Yeah, I guess. Love ya, Sis. See you soon.”

He clicked the “End” button. *How are you going to pull this off, Darrin*, he thought.

ONLINE VERSION

## Chapter 73

“So, what did he say?” Tina asked as soon as she and Stacy were alone in the kitchen that afternoon.

“He told me to mind my own business.”

“What? That’s bullshit! You’ve got a right to know where he got all that money.”

Stacy looked startled and put her finger to her lips.

“All what money?” Rod asked, hearing Tina’s rant as he walked into the kitchen to get some more salt and pepper for the steaks.

Tina spun on her heel and faced Rod. “Nothing, just girl talk.”

“No it wasn’t,” Rod’s face started to get red. “What have you done, Tina?”

Tina knew she was caught. She hadn’t seen Rod look this angry in a long time, if ever. She thought about going on the offensive. Maybe she would take the opportunity to ask about Wu. But she was a little scared of Rod right now. And she wasn’t going to be humiliated in front of Stacy. She looked down for what seemed like a long, long time.

She looked up. “Rod, I’m going to own up to this. I looked at Darrin’s papers one day. I saw that he has a bunch of money. I shouldn’t have done it. I wasn’t going to say anything. But then you told me that Darrin and Stacy were seeing each other. I was just trying to protect her. She’s my best friend, honey.”

Rod shook his head. “Jesus, Tina. I don’t know what surprises me more. Actually, I do. That’s pretty upstanding of you to admit. I’m pretty pissed at you, don’t get me wrong. I’m not gonna yell though. But let me take a moment here.” Rod took a deep breath. He poured himself a glass of Syrah. He swirled the wine around his glass, inhaled the aroma, and took a sip. He swished it a time or two in his mouth, then swallowed.

“Now, Charlie Chan Number One Daughter, let me help you solve this great mystery,” he said in his faux Chinese accent.

Tina nodded a couple of times with her lips pursed and took that shot. But her glare let Rod know it would be the only one.

“Darrin set up a couple of trusts around the time his Army buddy died back in 2001. One of the trusts pays income to his friend’s wife. The other one, I guess, is supposed to honor his friend by helping to support charitable causes.”

Tina’s jaw dropped.

“Wow,” Stacy said.

“But I saw the statements, Rod. They had Darrin’s name on them.”

“Of course they do. He’s the trustee. I think they’re named after him too. One is the Darrin Allis CRT or charitable remainder trust. That means Darrin doesn’t get taxed on the money that goes to charity. I know because I’m the backup trustee.”

“So, where did the money come from?”

“I staked him a little money and he invested well.”

“A little money? He’s made four million bucks in just a few years.”

“He’s a smart guy. What can I say?”

“Did he pay you back?” Tina asked.

“Tina!” Stacy exclaimed.

“It’s o.k., Stace. My wife gets to the bottom line pretty quickly. Let’s say that not only did I get my money back, but Darrin’s made it so we can do our remodel without taking a loan.”

“Hmmm. Something still doesn’t add up, Rod,” Tina pressed. “So why’s he pissing away his life at a homeless shelter? Why not go to work for Merrill Lynch?”

Rod shook his head. “What is it with your people and money? Sometimes people just do things because they’re the right thing to do.”

Stacy grimaced.

Tina felt her chest tightening up. That was it. No more. Not with everything else he was doing. He wasn’t going to get away with it. Right now, she hated this man.

“What is it with my people? You got some nerve, Rod.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you don’t have a problem sticking your dick into Chinese women, but you’re able to keep all these stereotypes in your head. Come on Rod, you’ll screw us but you can’t respect us?”

“Whoa. Us? Where’s this coming from?”

He looked at Stacy, who just shrugged.

“One word for you Rod. Wu,” Tina said, pointing her finger in Rod’s face.

Darrin walked in. “What’s going on you guys?”

“Darrin, I think we better go,” Stacy suggested.

“No. No,” Tina said. “You two stood up with us at our wedding. Now you’re going to find out how much of an asshole I married. Tell them who Wu is Rod. More importantly, tell them why you’re screwing her when you’re married to me.”

Rod’s eyebrows shot up, his head tilted back a little. He started to talk, but then just stopped with his mouth open. He was thinking.

“Tina, you’ve . . .,” Darrin began.

Rod turned to Darrin and put his hand on Darrin’s mouth, winking at him with the eye that was turned away from Tina.

“Darrin, don’t,” Rod said. “The lies need to stop.”

“God, Darrin,” Stacy said.

“It’s not his fault Stace. I swore him to secrecy.”

“To hell with both of you then,” Tina screamed. “Who is she?”

“Look, it started out once a week. I just needed to do it. And she was the one who could do it for me. But then she said we needed to do it at least 2 or 3 times a week,” Rod said.

Tina starting wiping tears from her eyes. That Rod was slightly smiling when he spoke only made things worse.

“Come on Rod,” Darrin said.

“No Darrin, Tina wants the truth. I think she deserves it. You know, she looked through your mail and told Stacy that you’re a millionaire. I set her straight on that though. This is how we got to Wu. Everything’s on the table.”

“Really?” Darrin said. He decided there was probably some justice in letting Rod continue.

“So, Wu and I are seeing each other three times a week. Everything is so brand new with her. I think about her and the things we talk about a lot when I’m not with her.”

“Go on,” Tina said with her arms crossed.

“I never knew I could feel this good. I didn’t realize what I was missing in life. What you weren’t sharing with me.”

“You’re a real bastard, Rod. You know that? I let you use me like a, like a . . .” she trailed off as she started to cry. She turned to Stacy and hugged her.

“I think you mean like a . . .,” Rod started, then switched to a language Darrin and Stacy couldn’t understand, “dog. You tigress, not dog. I love you. I marry you. You my tigress,”

Rod said in some pretty impressive, but choppy, Cantonese. He even got most of the intonations right. “Sun rise on you. Sun set on you. I’m sorry. You tigress. I not love teacher. I love tigress,” he finished, reaching out to Tina.

Stacy looked confused as Tina turned to Rod, took his outstretched hands, and started to cry on his shoulder.

Darrin finally burst out laughing.

“Wu is like 80 years old!” Darrin explained to Stacy. “I really can’t even conjure up in my mind what that would look like – Wu and Rod. Tina’s Dad hooked her up with Rod six months ago so Rod could learn Chinese. It was supposed to be a surprise. Rod wants to make sure their kids hear Chinese in their home and honor Tina’s heritage. I think it’s the hardest I’ve ever seen Rod study anything in his life.”

“That was really mean,” Stacy said, defending her friend. But she started to giggle when she saw Tina turn and smile at her.

“And that, my friends, is . . . the rest . . . of the story,” Rod said, imitating radio commentator Paul Harvey.

Tina took Darrin aside later that evening near the front door before he and Stacey left. “Hey. I owe you an apology for looking through your mail. Curiosity got the better of me. I’m sorry.”

“Next time, ask me if you want to know something. Just like you should’ve asked Rod about Wu. I feel kinda’ bad you’ve been going through weeks or months worrying about Rod. I’ve known him almost my whole life. He’s never loved anyone like he loves you. And the thing you need to remember about Rod is that he’s loyal. He won’t let you down. When he promised he’d love and be faithful to you, he meant it.”

“Thanks,” she said, fake slugging him in the arm. Tina wasn’t much for physical contact with people.

“I guess you oughta be easy on Rod for a little while. You know, after he gets all his laughs out of this he’s going to realize that was some serious stuff.”

“You mean thinking he was having an affair?”

“Exactly. Rod’s a loyal guy, but he also expects loyalty. Sooner or later he’s going to feel hurt.”

“Good advice. Now, on to you and Stacy.”

“Oh boy.”

“No. No. She’s happy. I’m down with that. But if you hurt her, there’s no where you’re going to be able to hide from me.”

“Yeah. Well my track record with women is that I’m the one who gets hurt.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I understand.”

“And how about getting a job. I mean, different than the one you have.”

Tina was surprised that Darrin didn’t jump on her for that one.

“You know, I’m probably going to be leaving the Assistance Center soon.”

“Really? Because of Stacy?”

“No, just . . . time to move on soon.”

“O.k.” She eyed him closely to see if she could pick up any other hints as to what he was talking about. “Good.” She smiled. “Well, I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Good. Me too,” he replied.

Rod and Stacy walked out of the kitchen carrying a couple plates of leftovers.

“Well, you two seem happy,” Rod said.

Darrin and Tina both shrugged.

“So I'll see you tomorrow at the game, buddy,” Rod said.

As Tina and Stacy hugged each other goodbye, and started to talk about Stacy's new Jimmy Choo purse, Rod whispered to Darrin, “Got a little visit the other day from some of your friends. We need to talk about that tomorrow.”

“Sure. Don't worry about it.”

“Now what are you boys being all whispery about?” Tina asked. “The next joke you're going to pull on me?”

“It will take some time to top the ‘fuck Wu’ prank,” Rod laughed.

Tina raised her foot to the level of Rod's testicles. “You better sleep with one eye open Rod, that's all I've got to say.”

Come on Darrin, let's not get into the middle of this,” Stacy urged. “Good night you guys.”

“Good night.”

“Night. Watch your step on the stairs. The flood light burned out again.”

## Chapter 74

Sunday mornings on L.A.'s Westside are relatively slow. The coffee shops do a good business with people reading the Sunday edition of the Times. A lot of joggers and cyclists are out. There are some local farmer's markets running, but not a lot happens before 11 a.m.

There was a time in the 1950s when churches were packed with people on Sunday mornings in Westwood and Brentwood. Studies over the years would show that a lot of the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who made up the churchgoing population in those areas fled to the San Fernando Valley. Prosperity also took its toll on Protestantism. The work ethic pushed a lot of people into the office on Sunday mornings to keep up. For many others, the idea of going to church just didn't seem that important anymore. And unlike their parents, the guilt of not going to church really wasn't much of a force for this new generation of Angelenos.

Stacy loved to ride her bike on Sundays. It was, by far, the best traffic day in L.A. Her cycling team, the "Biker Chicks" had 30-mile rides planned for three out of four Sundays each month. She was usually on the road by 6:30 a.m. on Sundays in the summer.

Tina liked to sleep in. It was her one day a week when she could stay in her pajamas and just relax. An avid reader, she stacked up the Calendar Sections of the paper all week and plowed through them on Sunday. Then she'd polish off the crossword. It was something she used to enjoy doing with her dad while she was growing up. She'd still call him up if she got stuck.

"Daddy, what's 84 Across?"

"84 Across? It's a logging term. 'Brashings.' They're the parts of trees loggers don't want. Things like tree tops and branches."

"And how about 66 Down?"

“66 Down? I’m not going to give you that one. You go to church more and you’ll get that one.”

“You owe me an answer Daddy.”

“I don’t owe you.”

“You didn’t tell me you found somebody to teach Rod Cantonese.”

“He told me not to tell.”

“How do you know Wu, anyway?”

“Used to play tennis with your mother. She was a professor at some British school in Hong Kong in the 1960’s.”

She was glad her father confirmed Rod’s story. Trust, but verify.

“I’m your daughter. You’re supposed to tell me everything.”

“Oh, you sound like your mother. Men can have secrets.”

“That’s where your wrong Daddy. Now 66 Down.”

“Epiphany.”

“Thanks Daddy. Love you.”

Rod and Darrin had their own ritual. They would meet for pancakes and bacon at IHOP. Then on to cover the right side of the infield for the Black Sox of the Westchester SlowPitch Sunday softball league. Rod had been playing in this league on field near LAX for almost as long as he’d had his Wednesday night poker game. In fact, he often used the softball league as a recruiting opportunity for his poker game.

As they were warming up their throwing arms, Rod let one sail over Darrin’s head into some bushes next to the field.

“Jeez, Rod.”

“Let me help you find the ball there, pal,” Rod said jogging over.

As they stepped out of view of their teammates, Rod punched Darrin in the bicep.

“Ouch,” Darrin yelled. “What’s that for?”

“For you making me talk to the FBI. Douche bag. I was going to punch you yesterday, but I didn’t want Tina to get suspicious.”

“Don’t worry. They’re on some wild goose chase.”

“Bullshit man. That had some pretty specific questions about Dar es Salaam and what happened there.”

“What’d you say?”

“You mean what’d I say to the cracker FBI agent that I had lied to in Dar es Salaam?”

“What?”

“Yeah, that hayseed Hogue that was trying to interview you in the field hospital when you were all messed up there. I pretended to be an Australian doctor to get him out of there. Well, ‘heeee’s baaaaaaack.’ And he remembered me.”

“Man, oh, man.”

“You better believe it.”

“So what did you say?”

Rod punched Darrin again in the arm, even harder.

“Would you stop it, Rod?”

“I’m pissed man.”

“O.k., o.k. Just stop it.”

“So I’m talkin’ to them in an Australian accent. To Hogue and some Asian guy with him.”

“Was his name Choi?”

“Yeah, Choi.”

“There wasn’t an older guy with him?”

“No, just Hogue. So I’m rattling on. Marisa comes in and thinks I’m going nuts or something. I finally pulled out some letter you had sent to the State Department.”

“What letter?”

“You were busting somebody’s balls over embassy security. They blew you off.”

“Where’d you get that? I don’t even really remember that.”

“Well, I told them you were a hero. And that if anybody was to blame it was that Johnny Duran guy.”

“What?” Darrin shouted, pushing Rod in the chest.

“Look, all’s I know is that you were doing fine until that guy contacted you back before 9/11.”

“He died trying to save people Rod. What’ve you ever done?”

“Huh,” Rod said. “Not much I guess. But I’ve carried your sorry ass a time or two. Messed up my heart with something I caught in Tanzania. Maybe I shouldn’t have bothered.”

Darrin threw his head back and stared at the sky. He looked back down on Rod.

“I’m sorry, Rod. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Hey, you’re just sayin’ what you feel, brother.”

“I just meant . . . . Look, he tried to keep people out of the North Tower on 9/11. I pulled his body out of the rubble. There’s not a day that goes by I don’t think about that.”

“How’d you know Darrin?”

“That it was him? Red sneakers,” Darrin said, looking down at his baseball cleats.

“No, that’s not what I meant. How did you know it was going to happen? How did you know when to invest that money and then pull it right back out?”

Darrin shrugged and held his palms skyward.

“Yeah, right. I told Mitch it was beginner’s luck. I also told him he’d never churn another dollar of mine in the market if he breathed a word of that to anybody. We both know it not’s true though, don’t we? You knew about 9/11 like you knew about Dar es Salaam.”

Darrin just stared at Rod.

“Is that why the FBI is asking questions. Is it the investments?”

“No. Well, I don’t think so at least.”

“What’s going on Darrin?”

“Can’t tell you.”

Rod thought for a moment. “Fuuuuuuck me. Is this why you’ve got Tina and I going out of town? You said the airfares were better this time of year. And you’ve pushed the contractor to start demolition next week?”

Darrin stood mum.

“I don’t even want to know why you needed the key to the storage locker.”

“You’re right, you don’t. Come on, let’s go play ball.”

“Are you getting me in the middle of something?”

“I’m trying my best not to, Rod.”

“Look, I just need to know what . . . .”

Darrin’s demeanor changed from stone faced to angry. He got to within a couple of inches from Rod’s face, and said in staccato fashion, “We are done talking about this.” It was the first time Rod could remember being scared of Darrin.

Rod nodded. "O.k." Then he slugged Darrin one last time in the arm as he walked by, as if to say, "Come on, I'll take you any time."

A telephoto lens across the parking lot from the ball field snapped off another roll of film during the exchange.

As they walked back to field, their pitcher showed up.

"If it isn't Lefty," Rod yelled to Eric Wise. Rod loved it when Eric was in town because they usually won. But Eric needed a little stoking up before the game. "I hope you remembered not to beat off with your good arm this week, Ace."

Eric just laughed. "Asshole."

Rod smiled.

"Hey neighbor," Eric said to Darrin. "Didn't see you around this morning."

"Yeah, I haven't been to the apartment for a couple days." Eric was the one who had given Darrin the lead on the vacant apartment next to his a few years before.

"Mmmm. Mmmm. Somebody's gettin' some," Eric said.

"Yeah, yeah," Darrin replied.

"You going to be back around this week?"

"Yeah, I'm working Monday through Friday so I'll be back there at night."

"I'm taking off tonight. Doing a story in Vegas this week about the real estate boom there. The dog walker will be by at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. all week to take Pugsley out."

"Really? You need me to do anything?"

"No. Just kind of keep an eye out and if for some reason the dog walker isn't showing up, give me a call on my cell. I don't want to come home to shit all over the floor or a starving dog."

“No problem. When are you back?”

“Saturday afternoon. Unless I start getting lucky in Vegas.”

“Eric, when you’re paying for hookers that’s not getting lucky. It’s just business,” Rod chimed in. “And when they tell you that little dick of yours is the biggest they’ve seen, they’re lying. That’s part of what you’re paying for.”

“Haw, haw. Now, get your fat ass over to first base Rod,” Eric replied. “And try doing some toe touchers during the week. It’s embarrassing how you can’t get your glove to touch the ground.”

Rod flipped him the finger over his shoulder as he walked away. He was satisfied he’d done his part to get Eric ready for the game.

## Chapter 75

"Yes, I'm just leaving church now with Althea. We're going to have lunch and I'll be in by 2 o'clock. Ok, talk to you then."

Michael Thompson clicked the "End Call" button on his Bluetooth and pulled the silver Mercedes out of the Westwood United Methodist Church parking lot onto Wilshire Boulevard. The Thompsons had attended Westwood UMC for close to 20 years now. They had both taught Sunday school while their children were growing up.

Althea was resting her head against the glass of the passenger window, staring out at nothing in particular.

"You're not going to scold me for workin' on the Lord's day again?"

Althea didn't say anything.

"What did you think of the service today, Baby."

"Oh, it was fine. That solo by the tenor in the choir was really good."

"How about the sermon, though?"

"O.k. I guess. He's no Susan, but it was o.k." Their former pastor, Susan Ross-Wilson had recently left their church to become bishop for the California Pacific Region of the United Methodist Church. Susan and Althea were close. In fact, it was Susan who had inspired Althea to run the Pico Avenue Assistance Center.

"I actually thought it was really well done," Michael said. "One of the best I've heard in a couple of years. I like the part where he said people can have different points of view about things and still be a good Christians."

Subtlety was never one of Michael's strong suits.

"You're not talking about me and Davis are you?"

"Not necessarily. But if the shoe fits your beautiful foot, Cinderella."

"I don't feel like Cinderella lately. Except that things seem to be turning back to pumpkins."

Michael reached over and rubbed his wife's shoulder.

"Did you talk to Darrin?"

"Oh yes. That boy has something tormenting him inside."

"What?"

"He wouldn't say."

"Did he seem nervous at all?"

"Nervous? No. Just like the weight of the world was all on his shoulders."

"Why wouldn't he just help the FBI?"

"Maybe the same reason the folks down in South Central aren't volunteering to talk to the police. Maybe he doesn't trust them."

"He's a white man refusing to help the government stop Middle-eastern terrorists. That's a bit different I'd say."

"Is it? I'm sure he has his reasons too."

"I don't think that's gonna wash with Davis."

"Well, that's because Davis doesn't know him. I know you've tried, but I think I need to talk to Davis."

Michael sighed.

"Michael?" she asked sternly.

"Do you really think it's going to make a difference? Davis has the FBI and his own people he has to deal with. Do you think he can just say, 'I know you've built a strong case, but Althea Thompson says the boy's innocent, so let's move on.'"

"Michael, if it were that strong of a case, they would have arrested him already."

"Not necessarily."

"Can you set it up with Davis?"

Michael thought about it for a moment.

"All right. On one condition, though. If Davis says he is still going forward, you're going to have to let Darrin go."

"Let him go? What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"Come on, 'thea, you can't afford publicity like this for the Assistance Center. It's bad enough the press will mention it, but you need to be able to distance yourself."

She didn't want to admit it, but she knew he was right. She had hundreds of people counting on her.

"O.k. Get the meeting with him tomorrow," she said, staring back out the window.

## Chapter 76

Jibril was alone in the safe house now. Ibrahim had gone to get some tea and bread.

Ibrahim loved his tea.

Jibril finished tightening the screw holding the video camera to the tripod. He pressed the red “Record” button and sat down in front of the camera.

He looked down to get his composure. This would be one of the most important speeches of his life.

“God is great,” he began in Arabic. “I say to my brother Osama, to my family, to my mother, to my brothers, always be faithful.” *That wasn’t necessary, he thought. Osama is always faithful. And what about Ayman. I need to include him. He might be hurt. But what if the Americans find this video? I should not mention Osama. What if? No, I should not mention him. He and Ayman will know why.*

He walked over to the camera and rewound it. He made sure he videotaped the empty chair for a moment and played that back. Yes, the earlier words were erased. He pressed the “Record” button again and sat down.

“God is great. I say to my family, my mother, my brothers, the mujahedin, always be faithful.” He paused, then looked down. This needed to inspire, so he needed a dramatic pause.

He looked back up into the camera.

“I have given my life as a martyr. I laid down my life of my own free will. No one forced me to do it.”

“My death was necessary to strike the heart of Satan. My death was not in vain. Together, we, the mujahedin, have shown Satan that he cannot stand against God forever. God will not allow it.”

“To my mujahedin brothers, take courage. This is now our time. Strike Satan again and again until he falls.”

“Our enemy seems strong, but it has no courage. If we fight back long enough, they will make peace with us.

“To my mother. To my wives. My death honors you.”

“To my brothers, the fruit of my mother’s womb, I want you to take courage. Take up the cause. For too long you have enjoyed the fruits of injustice perpetrated by the House of Saud against the faithful. You must take up where I have left off.”

“To the infidels, the people of America. The people of Europe. Your governments have lied to you. We did not start this fight. We are a peaceful people. We would much prefer to live our lives in God’s service without having to kill. But we are not afraid of you. Our reward is not here on earth. Our award awaits us in paradise. So, whether we live, or die, it is of no consequence.”

“The great sheik, Osama bin Laden, has offered peace to you again and again. You have refused to take his outstretched hand. Now is the time for judgment. God will not be mocked. One day, all will serve him.”

“To the crusaders. You shame the prophet, Jesus, bless his holy name. We also believe that Jesus, or Isa, bless his holy name, which is what we call him, will return one day. He will set everything right. He will judge the nonbelievers. And he will reward all who turn to Islam. Search your heart. Find the real Isa, bless his holy name. He does not tell you to kill those who follow God.”

“God is great.”

He waited for a minute after he finished. Then he stopped the record button and rewound back to the point of his last 'God is great.' He held a white sheet of paper in front of the camera and recorded that for a couple of minutes. Not the best film editing, but it would do the job.

He ejected the tape and carefully placed it in a padded manila envelope. He would mail it to his "family" back in Detroit. He had given the woman instructions about what to do with the tape in the event of his death. If she did not receive another letter from him within 30 days, she would forward the tape to someone in England. The contact there would forward it to Saudi Arabia, and from there it would find its way to al-Jazeera TV.

He did hope the tape would not have to be forwarded because of his death. He didn't fear death. But he felt there was so much more good for him to do. Surely God would protect him.

## Chapter 77

Rod was in the middle of a great dream. He was some sort of private detective, sitting in his office. A 1940's style office. Frosted glass door. He was there at his desk smoking a cigar, when a knock came. The door opened, and there was this beautiful Chinese woman in a raincoat. It was Tina, but it wasn't. She was smoking a cigarette with one of those long-stemmed holders.

"Mind if I have a seat?"

"Suit yourself, lady."

She sat down across the desk from him. As she crossed her legs her raincoat gave way a little. Her legs were beautiful.

"I am Madam Li. I need your help."

"O.k.," Rod said, making smoke rings as he puffed his cigar. That's how he knew it was a dream. He'd practiced and practiced and couldn't do those smoke rings. "Let's hear it."

"My husband is cheating on me."

"Really? How do you know?"

"A woman knows."

"So what do you want, the name of the woman? Pictures? Look, I don't usually get into family stuff. Always ends badly."

"No. You've misunderstood. My husband is cheating on me, and I want to get even."

She got up from her chair and leaned over the desk. He could see her breasts now under her loosely tied raincoat.

"Do you like Oriental women?"

That didn't seem right to him.

“Well, I call them Asian women. That’s more respectful.”

“Do you want me?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitating.

“Good. Very good. I want you to take off my raincoat, and then I want you to start . . .”

There was another knock at the office door. Then a doorbell. Then a telephone ringing. Oh, he didn’t want to let go of this dream. Not now.

“Sorry lady. Can you wait a minute while I get that?” he said. Maybe he could come back to it. That never worked, coming back to a dream. No, he was losing the dream. And what he was about to do.

The blackout curtains in Rod and Tina’s master bedroom really did the job. Sometimes, if he was up watching a late movie, Rod could sleep until noon without ever realizing the sun had come up. As the doorbell kept ringing, Rod knew it wasn’t going to be one of those days. He picked up the phone next to their bed, which was tied into the front gate.

“This better be good,” the man standing at his front gate heard from the speaker box.

“Oh, hey, Rod. Sorry. It’s Jeff Liner. We have an appointment this morning.”

*Shit*, Rod thought. *I’ve got to start keeping some kind of calendar or something.* Jeff was the contractor who was going to start remodeling their house in a couple of weeks.

“Yeah, Jeff, right. Let me buzz you through the gate. I’ll be right down.”

As he made his way to the front door he saw that Tina had left him a list of issues to go over with Jeff. “You never cease to amaze me lotus flower,” he said out loud.

He opened the door and let the contractor in.

“Hey Jeff, come on in. Can I get you some coffee?”

“Hey Rod. No, I’m fine.”

“Well, I need a little caffeine, so why don’t we go talk in the kitchen.”

“Sure.”

“Tina left me a list of things that we need to go over.”

“Oh, she’s not going to be here this morning?”

The contractor sounded a little concerned.

“No, she had a meeting she couldn’t get out of. So it’ll just be us guys. We can handle this, can’t we?”

“Well, sure, I guess so. I mean, I really need to get final sign off so I can finish getting the permit.”

“It’s cool. I’m authorized.”

Jeff exhaled slowly. “O.k. It’s just that we’ve done this a couple times before and then Tina decided she didn’t like the decisions, and . . .”

“Look. It’s cool. Let’s start going through the list,” Rod said, pouring himself a cup of coffee and taking a sip. *Aaagh. Cold. Tina must’ve left pretty early for the coffee pot to be shut off already. Man she works hard.* Rod lost that gene along the way, if he ever had it. He put his cup in the microwave. “I’m listening,” he said as he waited for his coffee to warm up.

“O.k., first off, let’s confirm the changes we made last week. I’ve totaled up the costs here on this sheet,” Jeff said, pulling a sheet out of his notebook and placing it on the table.

“Like I warned you, these kinds of things cost more. Going from granite to onyx. Double-beveled edges on the countertops. And Tina’s going with top of the line fixtures that come from Europe.”

Rod sat down with his warm mug and nearly spit coffee when he saw the new numbers.

“Damn, Jeff.”

“I know, I know.”

He thought about calling Tina. No, this was what she wanted. Some of the best advice his father had ever given him had been, “Son, the secret is to just give them what they ask for. If it gets you peace and quiet, there’s no amount of money that’s too much.” He wished his Dad had had a chance to meet Tina. He would have gotten a real kick out of her. Sometimes he could imagine his father calling her a “pretty little China doll.”

If Tina thought Rod was insensitive about race, she would’ve had quite a time with Rod’s dad. Edward Warner was a kid during World War II. He’d lost an uncle at Guadalcanal. So when Rod was growing up, it was always “the Japs” this and “the Japs” that. Then the Japanese automakers started threatening the Big 3 U.S. automakers with competition. And it became “the God damned Japs.”

Then there were “those other Orientals.” Not hostility, but not a lot of respect. Rod’s dad liked the 70’s show “Kung Fu” though. Not just David Carradine. The monks who taught him. He liked the idea of a disciplined life. He didn't feel he practiced one, but he liked the idea. It seemed to Rod, though, that getting up every morning for 34 years and never missing a day of work counted for something.

In his later years, Rod’s dad became friends with his Vietnamese doctor. The doctor and his family had been refugees from Saigon and came to America in the 1970s. Rod’s dad and Dr. Tran had quite a rapport. They liked to hunt and fish together, and really enjoyed each other’s company. Dr. Tran was with Ed Warner all the way through his battle with cancer. And Dr. Tran had some touching words about “his old friend” at the funeral.

In one of their last conversations, Rod's father told Rod, "Funny how when you get to know people, Rod, they ain't all that different from us. Might be a little shorter, and talk kind of funny, but not all that different."

Rod Warner didn't have a lot of goals or "to dos" left on his list in life. But one of them was to try to do a little better than his father in accepting – not just accepting, but respecting – people who were different. And, unlike his dad, he hoped he'd do it before it was too late to really matter.

"You o.k. with this then Rod?" Jeff asked.

"It is what it is, Jeff. I'm not busting your chops now, got it? But I don't want a bunch of crap later on with 'change orders' and that kind of nonsense. You know where I'm coming from? I'm paying you top dollar now. I don't need to get nicked and dimed later."

"Sure, Rod. I know what you're saying. And I appreciate you putting it that way. A lot of homeowners want to nickel and dime up front too. But it never really saves them money."

Rod exhaled loudly and gave him a look to reinforce his warning. "O.k., what's next?"

"Well, with the new appliances and everything, you're going to need more electrical capacity. We're going to need to add a new service box on the north side of the house . . ."

Rod thought to himself, *I'm so screwed here*. After a little while, his eyes started to glaze over. He was relieved to hear the doorbell ring.

"Hold that thought Jeff. Let me see who's at the door."

"No problem. I need to make a couple of calls and check on how my crews are doing this morning. Monday's always tough. Half the guys show up late or not at all."

Rod hit the intercom box on the wall in the kitchen, which activated the camera at the front gate.

“Hello?”

“Rod? It’s Stacy.”

“Hi Stace. Let me buzz you through the gate. Front door’s unlocked.”

He met Stacy in the entry way.

“Hey good looking. Tina’s off to work already.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve got a shoot later this morning that I’m on my way to. But I was hoping maybe we could talk for a few minutes?”

“O.k., well I’m kind of in the middle of things with the contractor. We’re trying to wrap up some final details.”

“Oh. And Tina’s not here for this?”

“Geez, what is it with everybody. I’m a big boy. I can make decisions.”

She gave him a look of doubt. “Mind if I sit in?”

“You want that pressure? ‘Cuz I’m going tell Tina it was your fault if things get screwed up,” he said, smiling.

“I can handle Tina.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever heard anybody say that before,” Rod replied.

Together they made pretty quick work of the contractor’s checklist.

“So these are two colors these doors come in. It takes 10 to 12 weeks to get them once we place the order, so I gotta have a decision today if we’re going to be on schedule.”

Rod seemed a little hesitant. “Well, they both look good. I, uh, . . . .”

“Tina would like this one. Definitely this one. That one over there? Blah,” Stacy said, sticking her tongue out.

“You sure? I kind of like . . . .”

“Rod, do you know of anything Tina owns that’s this color?”

“Well, no, but . . .”

“Trust me, she’ll get nauseous if she has to come home to that every night.”

“O.k. then,” Rod said. “We’ll go with what Stacy says.”

“All right. I just need your signatures here and here Rod,” Jeff said, pushing two more pieces of paper at Rod.

As Rod signed, Jeff started to make small talk with Stacy. She felt kind of uncomfortable around him by this point. She could tell he’d spent much of the last half hour looking at her breasts.

“So, how long have you known Tina?”

“A long time before Rod, back in her single days.”

“Oh,” Jeff said. “And how about you, are you still in your single days?”

Rod glanced over at Stacy and smiled.

“Uh, I’ve got a boyfriend. So we’ll see how long the single days last.”

“Lucky guy,” Jeff said, disappointedly.

“Jeff, her boyfriend is Darrin Allis. Remember, he was the one who recommended you?”

“Oh,” he replied. Stacy couldn’t tell if it was surprise, embarrassment, or some sort of disapproval. “Darrin’s a great guy. And, obviously, lucky. Like I said.”

“He is a great guy,” Stacy said, a little offended by how Jeff said “lucky.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Jeff said standing to leave. He put his hand on her bicep and looked her in the eye. “Maybe I’ll see you around some time.”

Rod didn't seem to catch it, but Stacy could tell the guy was making a little move. She just shrugged and looked away. This guy obviously thought he had more going on than Darrin and that Stacy should find him attractive. *What a jerk.*

As Rod closed the front door behind Jeff, he muttered, "Every meeting I have with this guy he tells me things are going to cost a hundred grand more than the last meeting. When is the bleeding going to stop?"

Stacy laughed. "Come on Rod, you know it's going to make Tina happy. That's all you really want, right?"

"At this rate, I might actually have to go back to work to pay for this remodel. I've got no skills that an employer would pay money for! Damn, I hope I don't have to sell my body. It would make me feel so, so cheap." He put his face in his hands and faked crying for effect.

"O.k., well the acting isn't so good either. So hopefully you have something else that would make you employable."

"Thanks a lot Stace. Now what's up?"

"Oh, I just wanted to talk to you about Darrin."

"Really? Why's that?" Rod asked, hoping the answer didn't have anything to do with the FBI.

"You've known him practically your whole life."

"Yep."

"Well, we're getting kind of close, you know."

Rod smiled, "That's what I hear."

Stacy rolled her eyes. "Boys and their locker room talk."

“No, no, it’s not like that. He really likes you a lot. Darrin isn’t the kind of guy that kisses and tells. Have a seat here in the living room. Sure I can’t get you anything?”

“No thanks,” she said sitting down.

Rod’s butt had barely hit the chair when Stacy started with, “What was his wife like?”

Rod sat back in his chair. He considered cutting short this little interview. But he was still steamed about yesterday and “Mr. Secretive’s” attitude at the ball field. Nope, Darrin Allis needed some light shined on his life.

“Wow. You sure you want to talk about this?”

“Positive.”

“Hmmm. How do you describe Becky?” he asked rhetorically. “Unpredictable, in a word. A real spit fire. The first time I met her she was 12 years old, wearing a pair of high top sneakers. She was lighting firecrackers and throwing them at some boys.” Rod caught himself smiling.

Stacy put her chin on her hand. That made Rod feel a little uncomfortable.

“But the things that made her fun to be around,” he continued, “that restlessness, that constant quest for adventure - didn't make her a very good wife. I felt like wringing her neck when she and Darrin got divorced. Of all the people to hurt in the world, why Darrin? He didn't do anything but love that girl.”

*Oops, Rod thought. Shouldn't have said the "love" part. That might not have been good.*

Stacy picked up on it right away.

“Do you think he still has feelings for her?”

“Darrin? For Becky? No, no way,” Rod tried to assure her. *Becky's husband probably scared that out of him after Darrin and Becky's little post-marital fling,* Rod thought.

“Look, I’ve never seen Darrin as happy as I’ve seen him with you. You know, I think what he saw in Becky was someone who shared his religious beliefs as well. Her dad was the preacher for the church Darrin went to.”

“Tell me about. I mean, his church.”

“Well, pretty conservative. I guess you’d say fundamentalist. Which was always a little funny to me. Darrin’s always been a pretty empathetic guy. Never really angry. He was disappointed in people sometimes, but never angry. There always seemed to be a lot of angry people going to that church. Angry that people didn’t believe what they believed. Angry that people were drinking, and smoking and dancing. It was like that movie with Kevin Bacon, you know,” Rod said, snapping his fingers searching for the name.

"Footloose?"

“Yeah that’s it. Only nobody ever did dance at that church! But it always struck me that Becky wasn’t really the right fit for Darrin and neither was that church. I wonder what would have happened if there were other choices. But they were what was there, and he accepted them.”

“How could anybody lock down on a relationship and a religion so young?”

“Darrin’s always been the smartest kid on the block. And that made him a little cocky. You couldn’t tell him he was making a mistake. I tried suggesting to him that maybe he needed to search for love and faith a bit more. But he wasn’t gonna listen to me.”

“Was anybody else telling him that?”

“I don’t know. But I doubt he would’ve listened to anybody.”

“Did Darrin ever get counseling after his marriage ended or his friend died?”

“Darrin? No way. He's all about self help. Funny that a guy who spends his whole life helping other people can't let people help him. After Johnny Duran died, I told him he should see the shrink I talked to after my dad died. Dr. Benton. He was really good. But Darrin wasn't interested, said something like, ‘Yeah, he wouldn't understand.’ No, it was ‘He wouldn't want to get involved.’ That was it, ‘involved.’”

“Were there others after Becky?”

“Well, uh, I guess so.” That there weren't more wasn't for lack of trying on Rod's part. “But nothing really serious.”

“So tell me about this accident he had in Africa. And about his friend who died in 9/11.”

If he hadn't known Stacy for so long, he would have thought maybe the FBI sent her out for this grilling. He figured he would take the indirect route and maybe she would forget her question.

“Well, to understand that, I think you have to go back to Darrin's days as a chaplain. It really changed him.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we were in high school, Darrin was always trying to do his best to make people better. It wasn't just talking to them about religion. I mean, that was the most important. But it was also making sure they were taking their grades seriously. Making sure they were making it to sports practice. That they had a ride to work. He just seemed to feel responsible for making sure everything got taken care of.”

“That sounds like Darrin.”

“But then he made a career out of it by becoming a chaplain. I think he got burned out on it. At least the religion part. You know, I kind of saw it coming. The look on his face in high

school when people blew him off. He'd try to tell them how God could help them. They didn't want to hear it."

"How about you? Did he ever convince you?"

"Naw. And that really got to me. All's he really wanted was for me to 'walk with Jesus.' But I let him down on that."

"Everybody's got their own path."

"That's true. I half expected though when he moved out here to California that he would take up where he left off in high school. But I never heard him really say one peep about religion. Just doesn't seem to be in him anymore. It made me feel kinda sad for him at first."

"Does he seem bitter? I mean, does he bad mouth the church?"

"Nope. Nothing. It's kind of funny they say there is this 'God gene' that people have in them that makes them believe. But it's like somebody flipped the switch to 'off' in Darrin's case."

"He's had a lot of shitty experiences."

"True enough," Rod replied. "But he loves people, though. Man, he works hard at that shelter. I've volunteered down there a couple times. He's really something. It's like when we were back in school. He's checking on everybody, making sure they're o.k. But nothing about religion. Just genuine concern."

"But how did he wind up getting hurt in Africa."

*Not going to let it go, are you?* he thought.

"He went there doing some research on I don't know what. I don't know if he remembers. He's got some sort of amnesia about all that. Doctor said that's not uncommon when someone goes through something traumatic."

“That’s a pretty nasty scar he has on his leg.”

“Yeah, that was the least of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Rod hesitated. “Ahhh, I mean he was bleeding to death. Almost died.”

“And there was something about drugs? Is that right?”

That startled Rod a bit. *Oh Tina*, he thought. *She told.*

“Yeah, the doctors over there loaded him up on some painkillers and almost overdosed him.”

“But Scott Greenbaum thought he was on drugs.”

“Don’t listen to everything Tina says, o.k.?”

“Does Scott think he was on drugs?”

“Look, Scott doesn’t like Darrin that much. Darrin wasn’t on drugs. You know him well enough.”

“Yes, well, at least I think I do.”

“So that was Africa. Somebody told me they thought he was trying to wave people away from the embassy before it got blown up. They thought he was a hero. But I guess we’ll never know.”

“Because?”

“Because I wasn’t there and Darrin doesn’t remember.”

“So how did his friend die on 9/11?”

“I’ve never been real clear on that.”

“Was his friend being a hero too?”

“I really don’t know. You’d have to ask Darrin about that.”

“Right. He shuts me down whenever I get near that topic.”

“I hear ya.”

“Do you think maybe Darrin was working for the government or something? He was in the military. Maybe he was part of the CIA or FBI?”

“I doubt that,” Rod responded quickly. He decided that was a misstep – he needed to slow down his answers, not be so sure.

“Why so sure?”

Again, she picked up on his little slip. *Good instincts this one*, he thought.

“Well. Aaah. I just think that he’s probably done with, you know, government service.”

“Maybe now, but then?”

“I guess it’s possible. I just don’t think so.”

“Why is Darrin setting up these trusts to help charities or widows or whatever? And you’re the back up? I mean, that sounds like something somebody does when they get old and they think they’re going to . . .”

He wouldn’t let her finish. “No. No. You got it wrong. Darrin’s just careful.”

She spent a moment really looking at Rod’s face. Then she sat back, like she was assessing. *God, I’m glad I don’t play poker with you*, he thought.

“Rod, if you were me, would you be worried?”

“Worried, how?”

“About being around Darrin?”

The question made Rod really uncomfortable. He had a choice to make in a split second. He was going to go with his gut and back up his boy. But he was going to be careful.

“Stacy, you’re great. I mean, great. This is just my opinion, so take it for what it’s worth,” he said, holding up his left hand and shrugging humbly. “You’d be lucky to have Darrin Allis love you forev. . .,” then without missing a beat, “for the rest of his life.”

“That’s really sweet, Rod. Really sweet,” she half mumbled as she put her chin back into her hand. “You meant to say forever though, right?”

She cocked her head a little to the left as she looked at him. Pinned him. With his own words. Now she knew what Rod knew – there was something dangerous out there. And Darrin was right in the middle of it.

“Sure Stace. O’ course, that’s what I meant,” Rod replied, with his best poker face, eyes fastened on hers. She was a natural at this game. And for all his skills, Rod couldn’t tell whether she was going to fold her hand or raise the bet.

## Chapter 78

Darrin was standing in the dining room with a bucket and sponge after the lunch crowd dwindled. There were always hungry people to feed, but Tuesdays tended to be a bit slower at the Assistance Center. Darrin took advantage of that by scheduling what he called the weekly “scrub down” on Tuesday afternoons. They always kept surfaces clean, but this was the time to make sure that things like chairs, table legs, doors, and “hard to reach” spots got careful attention. It was always amazing to discover where people would wipe food and other things when nobody was looking.

The cooks followed a similar procedure in the kitchen, as did the maintenance staff with the restrooms and common areas. Nobody had seen a cockroach for over a year at the Assistance Center. The employees and volunteers felt as proud of that as they did the “A” rating from the Health Department.

Darrin was annoyed to see Barrett and Choi walk in. He gave them a nod as they walked in and went back to scrubbing.

“Hi Darrin, we called earlier . . .,” Choi began.

“Yeah, you caught me in the middle of the lunch rush. I meant to call you back. I’ve just got a lot to do today.”

“Huh,” Barrett half grunted.

“We were hoping you’d have some time to talk to us this afternoon,” Choi continued.

“Well, it’s not the best time today,” Darrin replied.

“Looks like your just washing down tables,” Barrett said. *Whatever happened to the good ole’ days when we would’ve had him on the floor at this point, hands cuffed behind his back, dunking his head into that dirty bucket for about the third time?* he thought.

“Yeah, there’s once a week when we get a chance to really get everything clean, and this, well, is it.”

“We completely understand,” Choi said. “But this really can’t wait.”

“Why don’t we try to schedule something for tomorrow evening?” Darrin suggested.

“Sure, hey, why don’t we all pull out our calendars, and . . .” Barrett said, taking a step toward Darrin.

Choi stepped in between Barrett and Darrin. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to talk now,” Choi said.

“Can we at least talk later today?” Darrin countered.

Barrett’s face began to redden.

“Darrin, I’m afraid we’re going to have to insist that you come with us now,” Choi said, hoping to defuse things before Barrett exploded.

“O.k. Let me tell my boss,” Darrin said.

“Althea Thompson already knows,” Barrett said, smiling.

“How . . .,” Darrin began. Then it clicked. Whoever her connection was had probably orchestrated this.

“You can leave the bucket and sponge here,” Barrett added.

The drive over to the Federal building wouldn’t take quite as long at 2 o’clock in the afternoon. Darrin needed to quickly review where he had left them in their last little visit.

*Background. The incident. Tanzania. Hennessey and Duran dead. Jibril might be looking for him. And Tim McVeigh. That last question was kind of odd, he thought.*

The ride was a quiet one. No chit chat this time. Althea had told him he was in trouble. Maybe he was being played in the earlier meeting. But it made sense then. He could see why they needed his help. *Why the change in attitude now?* There was something he was missing.

They set him up in the same “conference room” again. No offer of pretzels this time, but Choi did bring him a bottle of water. As Choi was stepping out, Darrin saw a younger Latino man stop in the hallway and talk to him. The door didn’t shut completely and Darrin heard Choi say, “tell them we’ve got Darrin Allis set up in the Interrogation Room. Barrett needed a minute.”

“Damn, is Carl hittin’ the firewater again?” the other man asked.

“I don’t know what he’s doing. We’ll be ready soon.”

*Interrogation?* he thought to himself. It didn’t sound like he was the FBI’s little helper anymore. He had a feeling they knew a lot more than they were letting on compared to the last time. But the only other people who really knew anything were dead. Except for Jibril. It hadn’t sounded like they knew where he was though. Maybe they had him. Maybe he’d talked and they were just trying to get Darrin to confirm the story.

## Chapter 79

“Sorry to hold things up people,” Director Moran said as he walked into the Observation Room with Agent Randi Socia. “We just got off a call with D.C. on this.”

“I was just going over some things with Agents Barrett and Choi,” Assistant U.S. Attorney Manny Garza said. Turning back to Barrett and Choi, he said “You know gentlemen, we’re skating dangerously close to having to read him his rights at this point,” Garza advised. “You can ask about Jibril and those kinds of things. But steer away from things that are going to be viewed as incriminating.”

Barrett shook his head. “Come on!” he said. “Let’s just arrest him and be done with it.”

“Carl, I know you want this guy, but we’ve got a more immediate problem,” Director Moran explained. He glanced over to Agent Socia for assistance, then decided it would be better to explain it himself.

“The chatter on this one is off the charts. Whatever al Qaeda is planning is going to happen very soon, maybe before the date on the list Allis wrote up. And we’ve been reviewing videotapes of all the airports in Southern California. We think we have a shot of Jibril al-Attas walking through the terminal in San Diego last week.”

“Hey, a bird in the hand . . .,” Barrett replied.

“Not this time Carl. We’ll have plenty of time to put the finishing touches on a case against Darrin Allis. We need Jibril al-Attas. If we can bring him in, we might be able to stop this thing.”

“And what does the Special-Agent-in-Charge think?” Barrett asked, looking at Agent Randi Socia.

“Believe it or not, Carl, I was inclined to agree with you. But this pressure is coming all the way from the top. If we can, we need to swing for the fences here.”

“Politics. They should just let us do our jobs,” Barrett replied. “Come on Ron, let’s get this done.”

~ ~ ~

Darrin wondered how he was going to get Stacy out of town. If the FBI was this intent on talking to him at a moment’s notice, they might not let him leave L.A. He couldn’t let himself tell them anything anyway. So the approach here needed to be one of polite non-cooperation until they gave up.

The door to the Interrogation Room opened and Barrett lumbered in with what appeared to be a heavy box. He let it land with a thud on the table across from Darrin. He sat down and said nothing.

Agent Choi sat down on the other side of the box. “Darrin, thanks for coming in again to talk with us.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have . . .” Darrin began.

“Right, right. We know. Thanks,” Choi said. He didn’t want the videotape to indicate that Darrin’s presence was less than voluntary.

“So last time we spent quite a while getting to know you Darrin. It didn’t leave us much time for why we really wanted to talk to you,” Barrett said.

“O.k.”

“It’s Jibril al-Attas.”

“Well, I think I told you everything I know about that the last time.”

“Yes, just a few more questions though.”

Darrin nodded.

“When was the last time you spoke to him?”

“1991.”

“And that was . . .?”

“That was when I talked to him the last time.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Barrett said. *What a prick*, Barrett thought. “What did you talk about with Jibril al-Attas?”

“The artifact that my Chaplain’s Assistant, Hennessey, ruined.”

“You said before this artifact was . . . was some writings?”

“Yes, some writings.”

“Writings about what?”

“Religious writings. They were important to his family.”

“And what, specifically, did you talk to Jibril al-Attas about in regards to these writings?” Barrett asked.

“I apologized that Hennessey destroyed them.”

“And Jibril was satisfied with your apology.”

“I guess so. You would have to ask him.”

“You said before that he might be upset with you about this . . . what did you call it? An ‘incident?’”

“Yeah. You’d have to ask him.”

Barrett turned to Choi and shook his head. Choi could tell Barrett was quickly tiring of the nice guy approach.

Choi stepped in. “Darrin, we need you to help us here.”

“O.k. I’m not sure I can really help you with someone I haven’t spoken to since 1991.”

“Try your best,” said Barrett snidely.

“We know that Hennessey was in a lot of trouble with the Saudis. And we know you fixed it. How did you do it?” Choi asked.

“Apologies mean something there. I apologized,” Darrin sighed.

“It’s a little hard to believe that an ‘I’m sorry’ could solve an international incident,” Choi replied.

Darrin shrugged. He knew he might be pressing his luck.

Choi tapped his pen on the legal pad in front of him.

“Let me try this again,” Choi said. “Jibril is a dangerous man. We think he’s looking for you for some reason. We want to find him. We want to know what you know about Jibril. That’s why we’re starting with the last time you said you spoke to him. Do you understand?”

“I understand. And I’ve told you what I know about that.”

“You know, Darrin, Agent Choi is being awfully polite here. I think you should return the favor.”

“Oh, o.k. I guess I missed the politeness part when you guys took me out of work and brought me down here to answer questions that I could have answered in about 30 seconds back at the Assistance Center.”

Choi turned to Barrett. Even Choi seemed to be losing his patience.

Barrett needed to shake this up a bit. Catch Darrin Allis off guard. He stared at Darrin for a moment, thinking. *How do you rile up a religious nut?*

“Darrin, there was something more than an apology to Jibril, wasn’t there?” Barrett asked with a knowing smile.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“We spoke to Al Bryant, your C.O. We know.”

Darrin tried to remember exactly what he told Bryant. He had told him about the manuscript and Bryant dismissed it pretty quickly with a wisecrack. Surely he didn’t remember that.

“I don’t think I know what you’re referring to, Agent Barrett.”

“You know, you’re not making this easy, Darrin. Do you really want me to say this?”

“I guess you’re going to have to.”

“I mean, it might be pretty embarrassing for most guys. But for somebody like you. I mean, somebody who is religious . . . .”

“I don’t think I follow.”

“You settled the problem with Jibril by giving him more than an apology. You gave him sex, didn’t you?” Barrett asked.

“What? What did you say?” Darrin replied with his head cocked to the side in amused shock.

“I asked whether you gave Jibril al-Attas sex.”

Darrin looked at Choi, who seemed uncomfortable.

“Your C.O., Colonel Bryant, thought you and Jibril might have something going. Or, at least, that Jibril wanted sex from you.”

*Sounds like something Bryant would say,* Darrin thought.

“Bryant thought everybody was gay.”

“Was he right though Darrin? I mean, I can’t think of what else you could’ve done that fixed up that situation so quickly,” Barrett pressed.

Barrett felt like he had Darrin in check now. *A fundamentalist Baptist isn't going to take this type of accusation. Make him confess to what really happened so he can avoid being tagged as gay.*

Darrin caught the slight smirk on Barrett's face. He was being played. Pretty low for somebody being paid with taxpayer dollars. But what did he care if these guys thought he was gay. He was confident enough in his manhood. This was his way out. Make it good.

Darrin looked down at his shoes. Without looking up, he said, "Yeah, I had sex with him."

Barrett sat back in his chair. *Shit*, he thought.

"That's why he's looking for me," Darrin said, looking up. "I know it. Maybe he wants to kill me because I had sex with him and he feels guilty." *Up yours*, Darrin thought. *Try that crap with me.*

It was Darrin's turn to flash a little smirk at Barrett. Barrett stared back, unamused.

Now Barrett needed to unwind this. "What exactly did you guys do together," Barrett asked, doubting Darrin would take this further.

Think back to Davey, Darrin thought. The fight that Christmas in the 1980s between Davey, his gay brother-in-law, and Chuck Cooper, his father-in-law. *What would Davey do?*

"I performed oral sex on him. Then I told him that if he bothered Hennessey again, I would tell everybody. It made him angry. But it shut him up. And Hennessey got out of Saudi Arabia alive."

Barrett and Choi sat silent.

"I did what I had to for one of my men."

"Darrin, I have to tell you that this is a little shocking to me," Choi said.

“It’s not something I like to talk about. I haven’t talked about it until now.” *That part was true at least*, Darrin thought.

“And where did this happen?” Barrett asked.

“In my office at King Khalid Military City.”

Barrett had bluffed, and Darrin had called him on it. Choi wasn’t sure it was worth pushing this “if you’re gay, prove it” line of questioning any further.

“Darrin, do you recall writing down some dates on a piece of paper at some point? Dates that Jibril might be interested in?”

“Ahh, not sure exactly what . . .” Darrin said looking at Choi and then Barrett.

Barrett could feel the gin wearing off. Now Allis was going to deny writing down the dates for the attacks. This was a guy who wore the uniform. Barrett decided to take another tack.

“Darrin, our country has been in a war for the last 12 years. It started with the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. Then the attacks on our troops in Saudi Arabia at Khobar Towers. Then the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Then the U.S.S. Cole. Then 9/11. Then against our allies in Madrid, then London.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And you love your country, right?”

“Of course.”

“And you’d help your country if your country called.”

“Yes.”

“Then we need your help,” Barrett said, opening the file box he’d brought in. “We found this piece of paper. It has a bunch of dates on it, and notes. Do you recognize it?”

Darrin's jaw dropped. They definitely knew more than they were letting on.

"I do recall something like this. Where did you find this?"

"I can't tell you that. But I can tell you that it was in the possession of some al Qaeda operatives."

"Al Qaeda?" It was like a punch in the stomach to Darrin. *No, the bombings were happening because they were meant to happen. Was it possible that they were happening because of the notes? Where was Jibril in all of this?*

"Yeah, al Qaeda. The same people who've been carrying on a war with your country," Barrett said.

"So you recognize it?" Choi asked.

*How do I explain this?* Darrin thought. They wouldn't believe it if he told them the truth.

"They were some research notes of mine. I don't know how al Qaeda got them."

"Well, let's see," Barrett said. "You had a homosexual relationship with the half-brother of Osama bin Laden. An objective observer might see some little connection there."

*Gotta turn this on them,* Darrin thought.

"I don't think you got this from al Qaeda."

"Oh really?" Barrett replied. His head was starting to hurt from the back and forth. He should have had three gin shots instead of one. Even two shots wouldn't have been enough here. He knew he was going to get surly. Maybe he should excuse himself. *No. Forget it,* he thought. *I can break this guy down.*

"Yes, really."

“Now how were they going to pull off their attacks without a playbook? This is your handwriting – our experts confirmed it. And this includes the date of every attack since the World Trade Center bombing,” Barrett said, pointing at the paper.

*This is bad, Darrin thought. If they know the other dates, then they know the upcoming date.*

Darrin didn't respond.

“So you're going to sit there and do nothing while you're country is under attack.”

*I'm doing nothing? Darrin thought. Where have these guys been?*

“If I thought I could help, I would.”

“Where'd the dates come from in your notes, Darrin?”

He didn't want to go there. But they had him. They weren't going to let up. Time to play Barrett some more.

“I just copied them down.”

“From where?”

“An angel gave them to me.”

“Come again?” Barrett asked.

“An angel,” Darrin replied.

“An angel?”

“Yes, an angel. You know, religious guys like me believe in that stuff,” Darrin said, emphasizing the word “religious.”

Choi noticed Barrett's left hand shaking a little bit. He didn't know if Barrett needed a drink or was just getting angry.

“Darrin,” Agent Choi said, “I don’t think Agent Barrett meant any offense by saying you’re religious.”

“No offense taken. I was just trying to explain why I think it was an angel that gave me the notes. It’s because I’m religious. I look for things like that.”

Choi felt his own neck start to tighten. He tended to get this feeling when he thought Barrett would blow his top.

Barrett started slowly tapping his index finger on the table. Then he sped up. He looked down, a little surprised he was actually doing that.

“You know, I believe in angels too, Darrin.”

Darrin nodded.

“Let me tell you about one little angel named Melissa. Her daddy, Paul, was a friend of mine.”

“Huh,” Darrin said, “I’ve got a friend named Paul too.”

“My friend’s last name is Rothstein. Jewish guy. Your friend Jewish?”

“No.”

“What do you think of Jews, Darrin?”

Darrin thought it was an odd question. Hard to tell where Barrett was coming from, especially this time.

“Religion is a way that people perceive and evaluate the world around them. I think Judaism is a beautiful religion.”

“But what about Jews themselves?”

“All the respect in the world. Solid people. Know how to live life. If you can keep your religion together for thousands of years through all the persecution and pogroms and the

Holocaust, that's something. That takes an unbelievable internal strength. And passing it down from generation to generation. That's special."

"Really? Woulda thought you don't like Jews."

"Nothing could be further from the truth," Darrin replied.

\* \* \*

Rabbi Stuart Weinberg was far from his Philadelphia home, but it felt more like a million miles in Saudi Arabia. Strict limitations were placed on Jewish troops in the U.S. military who served in Saudi. Words such as "Jewish" or "Israel" could not be used around the Saudi hosts. It felt like a total gut punch for the very dedicated Jewish soldiers who were there to protect the Saudis and liberate Kuwait. It wasn't that they weren't used to suffering indignities in a predominately Christian society in the United States - but this approached the type of treatment Jews received in the early 20th Century in Europe.

It was Friday, February 22nd, 1991, and Chaplain (Major) Weinberg was in his office at Dhahran Air Base outside Riyadh preparing the closed-door service for Jewish troops that would begin at sundown. The phone rang.

"This is Weinberg," he answered.

"Hello Major, this is Captain Allis."

"Darrin! How's my favorite Baptist minister?"

"Not bad."

"Of course, you realize it's not all that hard to become my favorite Baptist minister. What with so many of your people not liking 'Jew boys' and all."

"Well, Stu, your people make it tough on us by owning all the banks."

There was a pause on the line.

They both started to laugh. The two had developed a rather strong friendship considering they had only met about four months before in coordinating “Operation Sandbox Synagogue.” Stuart enjoyed trying to educate a Baptist from Indiana about Jewish customs and culture.

“I kid. I’m a kidder,” Darrin said.

“Not bad. Not bad. But when you do the “kidder” bit you need to channel the voice of comedian Jackie Mason instead of the voice of lawyer Perry Mason. Or at least try to sound like Billy Crystal. Pretend you’ve got a fishbone in your throat and your head is all stuffed up from a cold,” Stu instructed.

“Got it. I’m a kidda” Darrin said, trying again.

“Much better. What’s going on anyway?” Stuart asked.

“Well, I’ve got a date that I was hoping you might be able to convert for me,” Darrin said.

“You know we’re not much into conversion Darrin. Most of our people are born Jewish. Who knew?” he said with his own best Jackie Mason imitation.

“Ba dum bum bum,” Darrin replied with a mock drum roll used to emphasize a comedian’s punch line. “No, a date from the Hebrew calendar.”

“O.k., what’s the date?” Chaplain Weinberg asked, relenting.

“It’s the 10th of Adar, 5751,” Darrin said

“How about tomorrow, would that be soon enough?” Stuart responded.

“Well, I was really hoping to find out today,” Darrin said disappointedly.

“Good, now you know,” Stuart said.

“What?” Darrin asked.

“The date.”

“O.k. But you said it would be tomorrow before you could give it to me.”

“No, I already gave it to you,” Stuart insisted.

“No you didn't.”

“O.k., Darrin, to keep from continuing this ‘Abbott and Costello in the Desert’ routine let me be clear. The 10th of Adar, 5751 starts tomorrow, Feb 23rd, 1991 at sunset. But I suppose you would normally refer to the day as February 24th.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“You with me Captain?” he asked Darrin.

“Yes, yes. Thanks Stu,” Darrin said, hanging up the phone.

According to the manuscript, the war would begin the next evening.

## Chapter 80

Barrett looked Darrin in the eyes, but then felt a little uncomfortable for some reason and looked down. He'd lost his train of thought.

"Where was I? Oh, I was telling you about my angel. Melissa. She's seven now. A beautiful little girl. I went to the hospital the day she was born."

~ ~ ~

"I didn't know Carl and Paul were close," Agent Socia said to Director Moran.

"Me either," Moran replied. "But Carl and I didn't talk a lot at that time." He didn't have to say much more. The rift between Jimmy Moran and Carl Barrett was common knowledge.

"Where's he going with this Jimmy?" asked Assistant U.S. Attorney Garza.

"Not sure Manny." *But I hope it's not going where I think it's going,* Moran thought.

~ ~ ~

"She loved her Daddy though," Barrett continued.

Darrin looked over at Choi, who was expressionless.

"So she kissed her Daddy goodbye one morning. Then he went to work on the 24th Floor of the North Tower. He never came home. And that little angel doesn't have a daddy anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Darrin replied.

Barrett pulled some more papers from the box on the table.

"Darrin, this is the flight manifest from United Airlines 207. It was an 8:30 p.m. flight from Chicago O'Hare to LaGuardia. Left the night before 9/11. Do you recognize this name?"

Barrett pointed to the name "Juan Duran."

"Yes. That's Johnny Duran."

“He got into LaGuardia around 11:30 p.m. on September 10th. Now here’s another flight manifest from American Flight 558. Left LAX at 9:30 p.m. on the 10th. Got in just after 6 a.m. local. Do you recognize that name?”

Barrett pointed to Darrin’s name.

“Yes, that’s my name.”

\* \* \*

They arrived at O'Hare at about 5:30 p.m. on September 10th. Darrin had wanted to get back to L.A. and suspected that things might be shut down for a while.

“I think I'm going to park and go in with you,” Johnny said.

“That's o.k., you don't have to.”

“Nah, it looks busy. Your flight might get delayed or something. I'll see you to your gate.”

“O.k., thanks Sarge.” Darrin thought it was a little odd, but Johnny was that way.

Always caring, never feeling put out doing something for a friend.

“Hey, old habits die hard, right? Make sure you get the Chaplain to where he's supposed to go. In one piece.”

“Yeah,” Darrin said smiling.

They breezed through security and headed to the gate for Darrin's United flight. They were calling his flight when he got to the gate.

"O.k. Let's talk tomorrow. I'm sorry, Sarge. I know it's hard for you to stand down."

Johnny just nodded, without saying anything. He stood there for moment, in his Bears jacket and his red high-tops, like he wanted to say something. Then he gave Darrin one of his bear hugs and slapped him on the back.

“Take care, Chappy.”

When Darrin got off the flight in L.A. at 8:30 that evening, he turned his cell phone back on. He had a half dozen messages. All from Glory. On the first call, Glory called to ask if the flight was delayed or something because Johnny hadn't returned yet from dropping Darrin off at O'Hare. The calls became increasingly frantic. By the last call, Glory was crying, saying she had found a note from Johnny. Two notes. One to her, one to Darrin. "Call me Darrin. Please call."

He dialed and Glory picked up immediately. She was hysterical.

"He left to go to New York. He didn't want you to know. He flew to New York after he dropped you off. That's what his note says. You got to go get him, Darrin. You got to go."

"O.k., o.k. Slow down, Glory. You said he left me a note."

"Yes, yes. It says, 'Chappy, sometimes you got to do what's right even if it turns out to be wrong. No matter how upside things are, you got to cling to what's in your heart.'"

*Dammit*, Darrin thought.

"O.k. Glory, I'm going to take the next flight to New York. There's got to be a redeye I can get on. I know where he's going. I'll get him and bring him back."

"I'm scared. Johnny's been telling me these things. I try not to think about it."

"Glory, it's gonna be o.k. Don't think about that. That's just talk. O.k.? It's just talk. Don't think about it."

"You'll go and make him come back?"

"Yes, we'll be back tomorrow. I promise."

"O.k. O.k., Darrin."

The United ticket agent at LAX tried to be helpful. I'm sorry sir, the next flight doesn't leave until 10 p.m. It's gets into JFK around 6:30 a.m.

“How long does it take to get to Lower Manhattan from JFK?”

“I don't know. Do you have a meeting?”

“Yes. A meeting. I have to be there by 8 a.m.”

A seasoned traveler behind him kibitzed, "Into JFK at 6:30, twenty minutes, half hour to get a cab, cross-town traffic, you'll never get there by 8."

"O.k., how about other airlines? Does anyone have an earlier flight?"

The ticket agent shrugged. "I only have the information that's here on United."

The traveler said, "Try American. I think they have an earlier one."

"O.k., thanks."

He didn't want to wake his sister Jane up to handle this. So he stepped out of line and called the 1-800 number for American.

"If you hurry, we have a 9:30 flight that gets into JFK at 6 a.m., sir," the American Airlines agent said. "Do you want to book that?"

"Yes, yes. My name is Darrin Allis. Let's book that."

\* \* \*

Barrett tried again to look Darrin in the eyes to gauge his reaction. It was hard to keep from looking away. *Must be the gin*, he thought. Hard to stay focused. It made him angry. He was angry he had taken a drink. He was angry he wasn't getting traction here. But, most of all, he was angry that this guy had something to do with the fact that a little girl didn't have a daddy and was alone. It was bad enough being a daddy who lost his little girl, but he was grown up. He didn't need somebody to take care of him. She did. And her daddy was gone.

Darrin didn't like the silence. He also didn't like the inference that Barrett was trying to draw with his and Johnny's presence in New York on 9/11.

"So you two were there."

Darrin paused for a moment before answering. "Yes."

"Had you guys been to New York before?"

"Yeah, for Hennessey's funeral."

"So you both decide to go to New York on 9/11. A date that is on this piece of paper in your handwriting. Why?"

~ ~ ~

"I thought we weren't going to go there today, Jimmy," said Garza.

"We weren't," Agent Socia replied.

Moran crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Let's give Carl a minute, o.k.?" he said.

~ ~ ~

"Johnny went. I followed him. I promised his wife that I would."

"Again. Why?"

Darrin didn't say anything.

"Let me tell you what I think," Barrett said. "I think your buddy, Duran, was involved in the 9/11 plot."

Again, Darrin didn't respond.

"I think that a man who spent 20 years in uniform turned on his country. I think he was a traitor."

The "traitor" comment caught Darrin off guard.

"You're wrong about that. Johnny Duran was a hero," Darrin said defensively.

“People died because of him!” Barrett yelled.

~ ~ ~

Jimmy Moran felt like he had seen this show before. He hadn't liked it the first time, and he wasn't interested in the rerun. He picked up the phone and dialed the Interrogation Room.

~ ~ ~

The phone rang in the Interrogation Room. Choi stood up and turned to get it.

“He did the wrong thing for the right reason,” Darrin said in a raised voice over the ringing phone. “He didn't want anyone to die.”

Barrett hadn't heard Darrin raise his voice like this before and saw it as an opening. Maybe he'd even get a chance to kick this guy's ass.

“He was a fucking coward who slaughtered 2,000 innocent people. I'd piss on his dead corpse right now if I had the chance,” Barrett said, jabbing his finger toward Darrin.

“You don't know what you're talking about,” Darrin said, beginning to rise from his chair.

Barrett saw Darrin move, took it as a threat, and acted in a split second. Choi saw him out of the corner of his eye as he picked up the phone. He spun around, phone in hand, to see Barrett put his right foot on the table and leap across at Darrin, knocking him back. Darrin's chair, then Darrin, and then Barrett hit the floor on the other side of the table.

~ ~ ~

“Ron! Ron! Are you there?” Moran shouted into the receiver. He could hear the phone receiver hit the floor all the while watching it on the Observation Room screen. “Luis, Cecil, get down there and help Ron! God dammit!”

~ ~ ~

At this point, Barrett was on his knees, straddling Darrin's chest. He grabbed Darrin's hair with his left hand and drew his right fist back. He was on autopilot. He heard Choi yelling something. This might be the only shot he'd get and he was going to make sure to break Darrin's nose. Darrin started to lift his head and Barrett slammed it back on the floor with his left hand.

"No you don't," Barrett yelled.

*He looked into Darrin's eyes. He was going to land his punch right between them. He'd never really noticed his eyes. Kind of a dark blue. But with colors. Other colors. Maybe this is why he was having a hard time making eye contact. The colors. He'd never really seen anything like this before. The colors were moving. It was like looking at a television.*

*It was the desert. U.S. soldiers, looking at him. "Fear not the one who can destroy the body, but the one who can destroy the spirit."*

*Humvees and tanks and personnel carriers racing across an open desert. Bodies. Thousands of uniformed bodies in ditches. Iraqi bodies. Bulldozers covering them up.*

*A young man in uniform in a casket. His face badly damaged. A woman crying.*

*A truck exploding. A searing pain in the thigh. An Arab man looking down at him. Jibril al-Attas.*

*A man in a Chicago Bull's jacket being buried in falling debris. Red hi-top sneakers. He was twisted around. A woman crying, "You wake up Johnny!"*

*Then a beautiful young woman with green eyes smiling at him.*

*Then an older man. Gentle. Looking at him. "He needs your help, Carl Barrett."*

*Then he was back in Nam. That kid, that Viet Cong kid, crawling toward him. Looking up, "Help me."*

*Then a classroom full of kids. He recognized that classroom. He'd been there before. There was a teacher – a woman -- at the chalkboard, writing something. She turned around. It was Trish. Dear, sweet Trish.*

“Trish?” Barrett said out loud.

~ ~ ~

“What did he say? Trish? Who’s that?” Garza asked.

“It was his wife,” Agent Socia replied.

~ ~ ~

*Trish smiled at him. Then she grew very serious. Like she did when he didn't remember to take his blood pressure medicine. He knew that look. “Help him Carl. Do you understand? Help him.”*

Barrett felt somebody grab his right arm. He turned to see it was Choi. He looked back down. It was just Darrin there now.

“Help me,” Darrin said softly to Barrett. “Help me.”

## Chapter 81

“Well, I gotta hand it to you Jimmy. You sure staffed this one well.”

“Shut up, Manny.”

“You guys have all these sophisticated interrogation techniques, but nothing works like a good ole’ fashioned beating. Well played,” Garza said, looking at this watch. “O.k., it’s 3:30 p.m. He’ll have a lawyer by 4:15.”

“I don’t think he’ll reach out to a lawyer. Randi, what’s your recommendation?”

Agent Socia was still in shock, watching Ron Choi pull Carl Barrett off their suspect. She could see Robles and Hogue running into the room.

“We gotta let him go,” she replied. “It’s our only chance. That Jibril contacts him.”

“But he just confessed,” Agent Claussen protested.

“Manny, did you hear a confession?”

“Nope. I heard him finger his friend, maybe.”

“Randi?”

“I’ll make sure he gets back to the Assistance Center. We’ll watch him 24/7.”

“Sounds right,” Moran replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he said, exiting the Observation Room.

~ ~ ~

Barrett didn’t resist being pulled off Darrin. But he kept eye contact with him. Hoping, hoping, he’d see something. See Trish.

“Come on Carl,” Robles said, getting between Barrett and Darrin. “We’re going to step out of here and take a break.”

“Yeah, sure,” Barrett mumbled as he watched Choi and Hogue help Darrin up from the floor. “I’m o.k., I’m o.k.”

“Not you I’m worried about, bro,” Agent Robles responded.

“Huh? Did you say something?” he asked, looking at Robles.

“You stepped in the shit this time Carl,” Robles said under his breath. “Let’s go.”

Barrett looked back at Darrin. Darrin nodded at him. Barrett nodded back. He understood.

“Darrin, are you o.k.?” Choi asked.

“Sure. Sure,” he said, watching Barrett being led out in the hall.

“I want you to sit down here Darrin. Can I get you some more water?” Choi asked.

“No, no. I’m fine.”

There was some muffled shouting out in the hallway. The door opened. Agent Robles poked his head in. “Uh, Agent Choi, could you step out here for a minute?”

“You are finished Carl! I carried your ass! Everybody has. And then you pull this shit?” said a man’s voice in the hallway.

Agent Robles tried to quickly shut the door.

“Darrin, Agent Hogue is going to stay with you here for a minute,” Choi said as he walked to the door. Choi paused before he opened the door. The muffled yelling had subsided. As he opened the door and tried to slip out, the voice in the hallway said, “What, now you’re not going to say anything? Let’s hear it Carl. You’ve never been able to shut that fat mouth of yours. Let’s hear it.”

Choi quickly exited, closing the door hard behind him.

“You sure you’re o.k.?” Cecil Hogue asked Darrin.

“Yeah.”

“You know, I’ve met you before,” Hogue said.

Darrin studied Hogue’s face. “Sorry, I’m usually good with remembering faces. But I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Well, you wouldn’t remember. It was back in ’98. Dar es Salaam. You were unconscious in a field hospital there.”

*So this is the guy Rod was so upset about,* Darrin thought.

“Oh. I really don’t remember that.”

“Your friend, Rod Warner,” Hogue said, smiling.

Darrin snorted a little. “Yes. Rod.”

“He’s quite a friend. He tried to make me think you were dead. He was afraid for you.”

“That’s Rod. He means well.”

“What were you doing there? The people I talked to said you were warning people off from going into the Embassy.”

Darrin looked down. “I was trying to do the right thing,” he said, without making eye contact.

“Why don’t you just tell us Darrin? Just tell us what’s going on.”

The door opened, and Agent Choi walked back in.

“Darrin, I think we’re finished here for today. I’m going to give you a ride back to the Assistance Center now.”

“O.k.,” Darrin said, getting up. He reached his hand out to Agent Hogue, “Nice meeting you.”

“Darrin, if you’ve got anything more to say, you can call either Agent Choi or myself,” Hogue said, grabbing his hand.

Choi, standing behind Darrin, shot Hogue a confused look.

“Thanks,” Darrin said.

As they pulled up to the Pico Avenue Assistance Center about 20 minutes later, Choi put the car in park and turned to Darrin in the backseat.

“Darrin, on behalf of the Bureau, I’d like to apologize for what happened today.”

“Apology accepted,” Darrin quickly replied.

“Agent Barrett has had a pretty rough time of it since his wife and daughter died. I think talking about that little girl brought it back to him. As I understand it, his daughter and his wife Theresa were his whole life.”

“Trish,” Darrin mumbled, looking away out the window.

“Excuse me?” Choi asked.

“Nothing,” Darrin replied, looking back. “I understand.”

Choi got out and then opened the back door for Darrin.

“If you want to talk, here’s my card again,” Ron Choi said, handing his business card to Darrin. “The cell number is there too. Call me anytime, day or night.”

“Right,” Darrin said, shoving the card in his pocket without looking at it. “What’s going to happen to Agent Barrett?”

“Oh, Barrett. I don’t know. He’s retiring soon.”

“Real shame,” Darrin said. “Good guy.”

“Yeah. Right,” Choi replied quizzically.

Choi exhaled slowly as Darrin walked away.

ONLINE VERSION