

THE DEVIL'S HAND

A THRILLER

JACK CARR

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

ATRIA

NEW YORK

LONDON

TORONTO

SYDNEY

NEW DELHI

Buried within the 9,723-word text of Executive Order 12333, United States Intelligence Activities, is this sentence in Part 2, Paragraph 13:

2.11 Prohibition on Assassination. No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in or conspire to engage in assassination.

Seven days after 9/11, Congress passed a 275-word resolution titled the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force. This document granted the president of the United States the authority to bring individuals and countries involved in the attack to justice. Twenty years later, it remains the sole legal basis for the continuing War on Terror.

... to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it ...

—AL-QAEDA FATWĀ, 1998

Im ba l'hargekha, hashkem l'hargo
If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first.

—TALMUDIC EDICT

PREFACE

ON THE MORNING OF September 11, 2001, nineteen men boarded four planes at Logan, Newark, and Dulles International Airports. All aircraft were bound for the West Coast. The flights were selected because they had the requisite fuel required for transcontinental flights.

Two hours later, the United States would be at war, a war that continues today.

This narrative is not about the events of that September morning. Rather, it is a reflection on the knowledge our adversaries acquired from our response to terrorism in the Middle East and Europe from 1979 through the first half of 2001 and what they have gleaned in the two decades following the seminal attack that changed the course of history.

This is a novel of asymmetric warfare.

I have long wondered what the enemy has learned watching us on the field of battle for what is now twenty years of sustained combat. What lessons have they learned and how have they altered their tactics and strategies to incorporate those lessons? If I were the enemy, what would I have learned?

These are questions I pondered while in uniform and continue to contemplate as an author. Our adversaries have observed us at the poker table for twenty years while having the benefit of seeing our cards. They have studied our tactics and seen our technologies evolve; they've

observed our shifting goals and objectives. They have taken notes as we fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and other flashpoints around the globe. Our response to a pandemic and the civil unrest plaguing our cities at a time when domestic political ideologies seem irreconcilable has not gone unnoticed. They see a country divided. Have they accounted for that division in their battle plans?

It has been almost twenty years since that September morning. Our enemy has been patient. They have been watching, learning, and adapting. Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, terrorist groups, and super-empowered individuals have been waiting, identifying gaps in our defenses and refining plots that exploit our weaknesses. It is my sincere hope that the operation you read about in the following pages is not currently being planned by a foreign intelligence service. We would be wise to remember that the Athenian historian Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* characterizes *hope* as *danger's comforter*. In modern military and intelligence parlance, the ancient Greek general's text translates as *hope is not a course of action*. While this is true, hope is oftentimes all one has in times of despair. The lesson is one as old as time: Be prepared.

There is arguably no military text as influential as *The Art of War*. The Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu knew that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." In an asymmetric confrontation, this is of extreme importance for the foe that does not possess a nuclear arsenal. How then would they defeat a super-power? "All warfare is based on deception." The teachings of the Warring States-period general are not foreign concepts to our adversaries—adversaries who play the long game. With those two idioms in mind, if your mission was to destroy a modern empire, what would you do?

This is also a book on the ethics, morality, and legality of targeted assassinations, what the Israelis call *Chissulim*, or eliminations, as an instrument of state power. Is there a difference between using a Reaper

UAV to take out an enemy combatant with an AGM-114 Hellfire or GBU-38 JDAM from fifty thousand feet and sending a 180-grain .300 Winchester Magnum through that same terrorist's brain stem from a thousand yards out? How does the enemy view those different methods of killing? Has the increasing reliance on UAVs to deliver death remotely had the intended effect? Has it saved American lives, or has it recruited more of what Dr. David Kilcullen calls "accidental guerrillas" to the cause?

On September 11, 2001, there were certain groups who stood shoulder to shoulder watching the twin towers fall on television, men with certain skills, men whose only mission in life was to be prepared for war. It is not openly discussed, but within this fraternity there were those who had but one thought: *God, I wish I was on one of those planes.* They are called to the fight: protectors, warriors, guardians. They are out there tonight. They are hunting. If the war returns to the home front, you want one of these sentinels standing by your side, armed and ready.

Prior to 9/11 these men would have chosen airline seats by the windows. Based on the data from previous hijackings, they knew this allowed them to be harder to physically strike in an initial violent takeover of the plane's cabin when terrorists needed to make examples of certain passengers to keep the others in line. Window seats bought them time to observe and plan a course of action. 9/11 shifted the hijacking paradigm. Following that Tuesday morning, those same guardians began selecting seats in the aisle so they could react to a threat instantly. They appear no different than anyone else, unless you know what to look for, unless you are one of them.

Researching this novel was an intensely emotional experience: listening to the calls from those on the hijacked aircraft to their loved ones on the ground, reading about those who perished, trapped in collapsing buildings, some electing to jump to their deaths rather than be burned alive.

I encourage everyone to visit the 9/11 memorial in lower Manhattan. Take your time. Heed its lessons.

As we move past the twentieth anniversary of the attacks and into our third decade of continuous warfare, do we have a clear vision of how this conflict ends? Or has our short-war strategy applied to a long-term conflict condemned our children and grandchildren to fight the sons and grandsons of the men who planned the deadliest terrorist attack in history? Do we still not understand the nature of the conflict in which we are engaged?

I fear we may all know the answer.

Jack Carr

Park City, Utah

September 11, 2020

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

- 1953:** CIA-Sponsored Iranian Coup d'état
- 1979:** Iranian Revolution
- 1979:** Iran Hostage Crisis Begins
- 1980:** Operation Eagle Claw
- 1980:** Iran–Iraq War Begins
- 1981:** Iran Hostage Crisis Ends
- 1983:** United States Embassy Bombing, Beirut, Lebanon
- 1983:** U.S. Marine Barracks Bombing, Beirut, Lebanon
- 1983:** United States Embassy Bombing, Kuwait City, Kuwait
- 1984:** CIA Beirut Station Chief William F. Buckley Kidnapping
- 1984:** United States Embassy Annex Bombing, Beirut, Lebanon
- 1985:** TWA Flight 847 Hijacking
- 1985:** Iran-Contra Affair Begins
- 1985:** *Achille Lauro* Hijacking
- 1985:** CIA Beirut Station Chief William Buckley Executed
- 1987:** Iran-Contra Affair Ends
- 1987:** Operation Earnest Will Begins
- 1988:** Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins Kidnapping, Lebanon
- 1988:** USS *Vincennes* Shoots Down Iran Air Flight 655
- 1988:** Iran–Iraq War Ends
- 1988:** Operation Earnest Will Ends

- 1988:** Pan Am Flight 103 Bombing
- 1990:** Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins Executed, Lebanon
- 1990:** Iraq Invasion of Kuwait
- 1990:** Operation Desert Shield
- 1991:** Operation Desert Storm
- 1993:** World Trade Center Bombing
- 1996:** Khobar Towers Bombing
- 1998:** United States East Africa Embassy Bombings
- 2000:** USS *Cole* Bombing
- 2001:** Ahmad Shah Massoud Assassinated
- 2001:** September 11 Terrorist Attacks
- 2001:** United States Invasion of Afghanistan
- 2003:** United States Invasion of Iraq
- 2006:** Abu Musab al-Zarqawi Killed
- 2008:** Imad Mughniyeh Killed
- 2011:** Osama bin Laden Killed
- 2020:** Qasem Soleimani Killed
- 2021:** Twentieth Anniversary of the September 11 Terrorist Attacks

What's past is prologue.

— William Shakespeare

THE DEVIL'S HAND

PROLOGUE

FOR THOSE NOT INVOLVED in the operation, the day that changed the world started no differently than any other. For a select few, there had been a slight variation to their routines. Aliyah Hajjar was one of those few.

For the past year, Aliyah had been employed by JetClean Industries, a commercial janitorial service specializing in aviation, cleaning planes between flights at Boston's Logan International Airport. She spent her days working her way up and down the aisles with the rest of her cleaning crew, picking trash out of seat back pockets, restocking the lavatories with toilet paper, disinfecting the galleys, and arranging the seat belts.

Aliyah did not mind the work. It gave her time away from her home where she could talk with the other Muslim women assigned to her rotation. It was also time away from her husband.

He had never struck her when they lived in Hamburg. The beatings had started once they moved to the United States after receiving their five-year business visas from the embassy in Berlin. At first, Aliyah thought it was because she had failed to bear him children. Now she knew differently.

She had not understood why the man who had studied to be an accountant in Germany was busing tables and cleaning the kitchen at a Moroccan restaurant outside Cambridge. Their meager take-home pay barely managed to cover the rent and put food on the table of their small Watertown apartment. The first time she pressed him on the subject, he slapped her across the face. Even now the memory of the sting, compounded by shock, caused her eyes to water. When she attempted to turn and run, he grabbed her by the throat and threw her onto their secondhand couch that reeked of mildew, squeezing the life from her as he screamed that she was not to question him again.

Later that night, there had been a knock at the door. Her husband had pointed to the bedroom and told her to stay there until he came to get her. Pressing her ear to the doorjamb, she strained to hear the short, hushed conversation. She recognized her native tongue but could not make out the words. She then put herself to bed and pretended to sleep. The next day, after work, she searched the small apartment and found an unfamiliar suitcase in the broom closet by the entrance. It was filled with cash. She tried to put it back exactly as she had found it.

That night he beat her again. This time, it took a few days for the swelling to go down. When she did return to Logan International, the hijab hid the marks, her bloodshot eyes all that were visible between the black slits.

From then on, she never touched an unfamiliar suitcase, backpack, or bag found in the apartment. She knew it was *hawala*, the ancient system of money transfer originating along the Silk Road. It allowed for the movement of funds around the world without the digital trail left by banks and wire transfers. *Hawalaladars* usually took a percentage of the transfer for their trouble, yet Aliyah noticed no perceivable change in their finances. As a Muslim woman with a strict Islamic upbringing, she was barred from knowing the specifics of their financial situation. She just knew the couch was moldy and her husband took no steps to replace it.

Two weeks ago, she'd returned home from work a little earlier than normal. She had not been feeling well for a few days. As she fished the keys from her purse, she fumbled and dropped them in the stairwell. Had the man coming down stopped to pick them up, smiled, and wished her a good day, she would have thought nothing of it. Instead he passed by without acknowledgment, his foot stepping within an inch of the keys. He was slightly older than she was, though not by much, and was unremarkable, except for one notable feature: It was his eyes that haunted her. *Empty*. Even though it was the height of the summer heat, she felt a chill. Perhaps she really was coming down with something.

No, she thought. I've seen him somewhere before. Hamburg? Cairo? Somewhere.

As she pushed the cleaning cart onto the plane docked at gate B32, she wondered if the man with the empty eyes was involved with this evening's mission.

Her husband had called in sick to the restaurant, which Aliyah thought was odd because he was clearly not ill. Yet she accepted it as she did so many other things in her life; the violence had taught her it was best to not ask questions. Then he told her; Allah had chosen her for an important task. Now she understood. She understood why they had applied for business visas in Germany, why her husband had taken this menial job in the United States, why they prayed only at home and did not frequent the mosque, and why she had been forced to apply for the minimum-wage job cleaning airplanes.

The Boeing 767 was scheduled for a morning long-haul flight to Los Angeles. It needed to be cleaned the night before so it would be ready to go the following day.

She adjusted her hijab and knelt, using the blade from her box cutter to scrape gum from the deck. *Disgusting*. She and the other janitors on her crew had been taught to use the short steel edge to remove bubble

gum from the underside of seats and from the floor of the aircraft they were entrusted to clean. It was standard industry practice.

What wasn't standard industry practice was what she did next.

She had intentionally maneuvered into a position in first class where she could track the positions of her colleagues. Two were picking their way through the seat backs of the main cabin, filling garbage bags with refuse from the last flight of the day. One was sanitizing the aft lavatory. A supervisor was perched mid-cabin overseeing their work while marking "complete" boxes on a checklist.

Pretending to notice something across the aisle, she moved to the second row and knelt. When she stood back up, box cutters were taped to the underside of seats 2A and 2B.

. . .

As their chauffeured Town Car slowly worked through the morning New York City traffic, Alec Christensen heard the familiar Nokia tone chiming from the new phone in his messenger bag. He fished it out by the third stanza. Tilting the device toward his fiancée in the seat next to him, he smiled, showing off the new caller ID feature.

"You are on that thing too much," she scolded. "It's going to give you a tumor."

"Hey, Dad," Alec said, after hitting the large talk button with his thumb and bringing it to his ear. "Just about there. Oh, really? That's too bad. Okay. Then I'll meet you at the Rainbow Room. Yep. Eight thirty. I'll let her know. See you then."

"What'd he say?" Jen asked.

"He had to move our breakfast to Midtown. A meeting at the office came up, so he can't make it down. He said to send his *deepest regrets*," Alec said, switching to the mid-Atlantic accent so heavy in his father's voice.

"You sound like Julia Child."

"Oh, come on, that was at least a good William F. Buckley. Want to try and swing breakfast with us?"

Jen looked at her watch.

"Well, my boss *is* coming in late today. He's dropping his son off for the first day of kindergarten. Even so, I'd better not. I don't think I'd make it back in time. Are you going to tell him without me?" Jen said, switching topics.

"What do you think?" Alec asked as his thumbs went to work on the small keypad.

"Why don't you just call? This new texting thing is just too weird. I don't see it catching on. And besides, you're missing this beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky."

"These tech guys like it, and it's actually pretty efficient once you get the hang of it. See, you just have to scroll through these letters until you find the one you want. Just letting the team know I'm on schedule to meet them at eleven at the property on Eighth."

"Think your company is going to buy the building?"

"Probably just lease part of it for now, but you never know. This bubble is going to burst, Jen. It's not going to be pretty, but the companies that survive are going to emerge stronger and gain a huge amount of market share."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," Jen said, sliding across the backseat of the Lincoln, closer to the man she planned to share her life with.

It would have been faster to take the subway into lower Manhattan, but when Alec was in town his father always provided a car service. Jen suspected it came from protecting his only child. It broke her heart that Alec had no memories of his mother who passed away before he could even crawl.

"How long do you think the meeting will take?" she asked.

"Probably a couple hours. I want to go for a run when it's over so I can think it through. It's a big deal for the company and I want to make sure we are doing the right thing."

“How you run in this city, I’ll never understand.”

“I grew up doing it, so it’s totally normal.”

“Well, you be careful. I worry about you running around these streets. It’s dangerous.”

“Well, it’s not as safe as doing sprints on campus at Maloney Field, I’ll give you that. But, trust me, I’m a professional.”

They had met as undergrads at Stanford but were now two years removed from Cardinal Red. Alex had played lacrosse and liked having had the advantage of growing up in the East when it came to a sport still catching on across the country on the left coast. When he met Jen, he instantly loved everything about her. After graduation, he had elected to join a small struggling Silicon Valley start-up founded by fellow Stanford alums and was taking payment in stock options like almost everyone else. Unlike everyone else, he had a trust fund that kept him from living off ramen noodles.

Jen had been offered a fantastic opportunity at Cantor Fitzgerald and was just beginning her third year as an investment banker. She was planning to apply to Harvard Business School and start classes next fall, a move Alec’s father fully supported in the hopes it would lure his son back to the Atlantic seaboard. They had been engaged for the past two months. Alec had wanted to wait to tell his dad in person. He was sensitive to the fact that the man who raised him had done so alone, the love of his life succumbing to cancer so early in their young lives. His father had never remarried. Alec had planned to tell him that morning at Windows on the World with Jen by his side.

“You know what?” Jen asked, before answering her own question. “It’s better this way. You two boys have your special moment together, and then I’ll let him spoil me at dinner.”

“Where do you want to go? I’m sure he’ll ask.”

“It’s Tuesday, so how about the Pool Room?”

“Dad is more of a Grill Room guy, but for you I’m sure he’ll make an exception. Are you sure I should tell him without you?”

She put her hand under Alec's chin and twisted his head away from his "texting" so she could look into his eyes.

"I'm positive."

. . .

"Hey, Dad!"

"Right on time, lad," his dad said, looking at his Patek Philippe.

"I still set mine five minutes ahead just like you taught me," Alec said, pointing to his left wrist. "That way I can be five minutes late and still be on time."

"That wasn't really the point, son. The point is to be early. It's disrespectful to be late. Shows you don't treasure our most valuable asset . . ."

"Time," Alec said, completing the sentence he'd heard from his dad so often over the years.

"That's right."

"See, I do listen."

"Mr. Christensen," the maître d' interjected politely. "Your table is ready."

"Thank you, Charles."

They were seated by the giant windows of the iconic New York restaurant. The Empire State Building dominated the view south toward Soho, Greenwich Village, and the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Lady Liberty was even visible in the distance on such a clear day from sixty-five floors up. Alec smiled, picturing Jen grabbing a bite in the lobby of her building. Maybe she had gone ahead with breakfast at Windows on the World by herself before heading to her desk and was looking uptown toward him right at this very moment.

Dobson Christensen was dressed impeccably in a dark three-piece suit, not a single gray hair out of place. His tailor did an outstanding job of disguising the fact that he was not in the best of shape. Like many

of his generation, exercise consisted of walking the links at Maidstone and the occasional trek afield at Clove Valley Rod and Gun Club, both of which consisted of equal parts business and pleasure.

Alec's usual Sandhill Road attire of khakis and a blue button-down had been accented with a dark blue blazer and tie. He dressed more formally in New York out of habit, having grown up dining with his father in places that would not approve of the more casual uniforms that were the norm in Palo Alto.

His father placed a white napkin in his lap with great ceremony as a waiter set down a French press. The senior Christensen was a regular.

"For you, sir?"

"I'll have the same, please," Alec said.

"So, tell me about the future of the Internet," Dobson said. "And don't leave out the parts about where I should invest other people's money."

Dobson Christensen was a bit of an anomaly. While most with money and means had sheltered in place in the world of academia to avoid the Vietnam War, Dobson had taken a different path. He'd dropped out of Princeton and volunteered for the Marine Corps. Years later he'd say he did it to just "get it over with," but Alec knew better. Behind the suit, polished shoes, and country club exterior was a fiercely patriotic man who could have volunteered for stateside National Guard duty or qualified for a student deferment but instead was drawn to the fight. He found himself as a door gunner on a Huey gunship, which was shot down on its first mission before he could even fire a shot. The pilot and copilot were killed, but Lance Corporal Christensen survived with a broken back, pelvis, hip, and femur. He spent the rest of his Marine Corps experience recovering, first in Okinawa and then at Walter Reed. His cane and limp were a constant reminder, and when asked about it, he would say that his Purple Heart was a VC marksmanship medal. He liked to joke that he spent more time in boot camp than in Vietnam.

The waiter returned and handed menus to both men. Dobson

put his aside, saying, "I'll have the forestière omelet and a side of your thickest bacon." He wasn't one for wasting that most valuable of assets.

"Ah, I'll have . . ." Alec said, scanning his choices, "the . . ."

A sound he could only associate with a freight train barreling by at full speed shook the room. Stunned patrons gripped their tables, bracing themselves for what some thought was an earthquake even though their left brains were telling them that couldn't be true.

Alec looked to his father, whose eyes were focused southeast. Alec followed his father's gaze and stood, pressing his hands and face to the glass. He watched the plane descend from across the Hudson into the city between the buildings. Veering toward its target, it disappeared into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

Fire, smoke, carnage, death. *Jen.*

Alec sprinted for the elevator.

"Come on!" he shouted. He glanced at the stairwell and contemplated the option but forced himself to wait, knowing the elevator would still be the fastest way down.

Most people were glued to the windows, watching the smoke rising from the North Tower, so when the elevator doors opened, Alec was alone.

Please, God, let her live. Let her be in the lobby. Just let her live!

Fighting back the bile in his throat, he pressed his eyes shut, willing the elevator to descend faster.

Where did that plane hit?

He knew Cantor Fitzgerald occupied floors 101 to 105 and that Windows on the World was perched atop the North Tower.

Come on! Come on!

The doors parted and Alec launched himself through a group of businessmen unaware of the disaster unfolding just a few miles south. He hit the street at a full sprint. Turning toward the subway, he stopped

and looked at the steps leading down, then back toward the dark smoke invading the blue sky over his beloved city. He made his decision.

He ran.

Sprinting toward the smoke and the flames, he dodged those not yet aware that the world had changed. Heart pumping, lungs burning, his legs propelled him forward, tearing through intersections oblivious to the honking horns and the cursing of those he knocked over in his mission.

Sirens, he'd always remember the sirens.

As the mortally wounded building loomed larger, he pushed past people stumbling in the opposite direction, some in a panic, others in a daze. He began to charge by police officers and firefighters yelling at him to turn around. He then heard the screaming engines of what he would later learn was United Airlines Flight 175 as it homed in from the south. He felt the impact in his soul.

Two planes. He had to get to Jen. *Dear God, let her be all right*.

He thrust himself forward, closer to the broken glass and twisted metal, toward the jet fuel burning its way through the steel heart of the structure. He ran toward the dead and dying. He ran toward bodies plummeting from the sky. He ran toward Jen. He ran toward Hell.

. . .

"Sit," her husband commanded.

Aliyah sat, the stale smell of the couch on which he'd first choked her filling her nostrils.

They had already competed *fjir*, their morning prayers, he in the main room and Aliyah in the bedroom. Islam forbids men and women from practicing the second of the five pillars of Islam together.

She'd performed *wudu* with water from the bathroom sink as he did so from the kitchen, ritually washing the body: mouth, nostrils, hands, arms, head, and feet. Though not purified water as prescribed

in the Quran, they were on enemy soil and Allah would forgive them this one indiscretion. Instead of adhering to *salah* that morning, she had sat on the bed and looked through the small, dirty window listening to her husband recite Quranic verses in Arabic. They spoke Farsi in the home but true adherents to Islam prayed in the language of the Prophet. She entered the main room only after she heard him finish and turn on the small television.

They watched CNN in silence.

When the first plane hit, she remembered. She remembered Mohammed Haydar Zammar from the al-Quds mosque during their time in Germany. She remembered his hatred of America. She remembered his incessant talking. She remembered the hard floor and paint peeling from the walls of the women's prayer room. And she remembered the man with the empty eyes. Though his picture would not be plastered across television screens around the world for a few days, she remembered where she had first met the man in the stairwell. She remembered him sitting down with her husband in their Hamburg apartment. He was soft-spoken, almost aloof, paying her no attention. She had made them tea. They had talked about planes. His name was Mohamed Atta.

"We have triumphed over our unjust enemy," her husband said, without taking his eyes from the screen.

"Praise be to Allah for this victory," she replied dutifully.

"This," he said, pointing to the billowing clouds of smoke coming from what, until that moment, had been a symbol of America's economic might to the rest of the world. "This is only the beginning."

PART ONE

ORIGINS

“One of the most striking proofs of the personal existence of Satan . . . is found in the fact, that he has so influenced the minds of multitudes in reference to his existence and doings, as to make them believe that he does not exist.”

—WILLIAM RAMSEY

CHAPTER 1

*CIA Applicant Processing Unit
Dulles Discovery Building
Chantilly, Virginia
Present Day*

“IS YOUR FIRST NAME James?”

“Yes,” Reece replied.

“Have you ever lied to get out of trouble?”

Reece paused.

“Yes.”

“Do you intend to answer these questions truthfully?”

Another pause.

“Yes.”

“Is today Wednesday?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever committed a crime for which you were not caught?”

“Yes?”

“Are we in Virginia?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever committed murder?”

“Ah . . .”

“Just yes or no, please.”

“No.”

Reece saw the polygrapher make a note.

“Are you a United States citizen?”

“Yes.”

Through his peripheral vision, Reece saw the polygrapher make another notation and adjust a setting on his laptop.

Great.

“Have you ever been part of a group that has wanted to overthrow the United States government?”

Reece sat in the nondescript room of what would have been a normal office park anywhere else in America. This one was located in Chantilly, Virginia, and was owned by a front company created by the CIA. Reece was halfway through day one of his three-day CIA processing evaluation. Even with his past experience and relationship with the Agency he still had to pass the medical and psychological screening tests to officially join the ranks of Ground Branch. Bureaucracy was, after all, bureaucracy.

“Let’s try this again,” “John” said in a tone meant to convey exasperation. “Be sure to answer yes or no honestly. And remain completely still. Keep your eyes focused on one point on the wall in front of you or we will have to start all over.”

Reece felt his pulse quicken. He’d been on the receiving end of an interrogation before, and then, just as now, he wanted nothing more than to tear his interrogator’s throat out. He’d completed a form in the waiting area, answering the exact questions he was currently being asked. He’d even gone over them with his “examiner” before being hooked up to the machine.

“Have you ever been part of a group that has wanted to overthrow the United States government?” the polygraph examiner asked a second time.

“No.”

“Have you ever been in the employment of a foreign intelligence service?”

Reece tried to reframe the question in his mind. Instead, a memory intruded; Ivan Zharkov standing in the snow outside his dacha in Siberia, the flames from the downed Mi8 helicopter smoldering behind him, the dead bodies of his security detail strewn about the ground around him, a security detail Reece had killed.

Are you offering to spy for me, Mr. Reece?

“No,” Reece responded.

The polygraph examiner made another note.

A blood pressure cuff squeezed Reece's left arm, two rubber air-filled tubes called pneumographs encircled his chest and stomach to record his breathing, and galvanometers had been placed on the first and third fingers of his right hand to measure sweat secretions. His chair was fitted with a sensor pad, thanks to Ana Montes, a senior Cuban analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency who had been recruited by Cuban intelligence while in graduate school at Johns Hopkins. From 1985 until her arrest on espionage charges in 2001, she routinely passed classified information to Havana that was then transferred to the Soviets. Later, that information was sold to China, North Korea, Venezuela, and Iran. Her Cuban handlers had trained her to manipulate her polygraph by contracting her sphincter muscles, which is why Reece now sat on a sensor. He was also in socks, his feet resting on two individual pads. All movements would be recorded by the polygraph.

The room was small, but not claustrophobically so, about twice the size of a single patient room at a doctor's office. Reece thought it was possible the off-white walls had faded to their current hue by absorbing the fear that permeated the space on an almost daily basis. There was a camera visible in the upper left-hand corner, but Reece was sure the CIA had concealed a few others so as not to miss a single eye twitch or muscle movement. Though he stared at a blank wall, a mirror had been installed just off-center, two-way of course, for observation. The room was bare of any additional distractions other than the small table to his

left where the polygrapher sat with his computer. It was unquestionably designed to make CIA candidates as uncomfortable as possible.

“Have you ever committed a crime for which you were not caught?”

Visions of his dead wife and daughter caused his heart rate to increase. Reece swallowed as he remembered watching the silver Mercedes G550 SUV crest the rise on the mountain road outside Jackson through the magnification of his Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x32mm scope, just before pressing the trigger to send a Barnes Triple Shock .300 Winchester Magnum through the brain stem of Marcus Boykin, the first person Reece had eliminated on his quest to avenge his family and SEAL Troop.

“Mr. Reece?” his examiner asked.

“What?”

“We have to get through these questions. Have you ever committed a crime for which you were not caught?”

Reece felt the working end of his Winkler/Sayoc Tomahawk catch in the bone and brain matter of Imam Hammadi Izmail Masood’s crushed skull before twisting it out and going to work on the gristle of the terrorist’s neck muscles. Reece had freed the head from the terrorist’s body so he could impale it on the spiked fence of the mosque as a warning to the others that death was coming for them all.

“No,” Reece lied.

“Have you visited antipolygraph.org to prepare for this examination?”

“Yes.”

This answer visibly perturbed the examiner.

“Are you sitting down?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever committed murder?”

“I thought we covered that.”

“Just yes-or-no answers.”

Again, Reece's mind accessed memories he'd never be able to repress. He remembered hitting send on the cell phone that detonated the suicide vest on political fundraiser Mike Tedesco, turning him and SEAL Admiral Gerald Pilsner into human mist.

He remembered shoving the HK pistol into Josh Holder's mouth, feeling teeth breaking around the long suppressor before the .45-caliber bullet blew the back of the Defense Criminal Investigative Service man's head off.

"No."

"Have you ever plotted to overthrow the U.S. government?"

Reece thought of the EFP, Explosively Formed Penetrator, he'd built. It was an instrument of terror overseas, but Reece had used the tactics and techniques of the enemy on home soil. He'd become an insurgent. The IED sent a slug of molten copper through the armored Suburban of Congressman J. D. Hartley in SoHo, eviscerating the conspirator and bringing the reality of war to the home front. Reece saw the look of abject horror in Secretary of Defense Loraine Hartley's eyes as he shot her twice in the chest and once in the head in her Fishers Island mansion.

"No."

"Is the wall white?"

"Sort of."

"Once again, just yes or no."

"Yes."

"Have you ever been involved in the torture of enemy combatants?"

The odor of vomit and piss from the floor of Saul Agnon's hotel room keyed the memory of the attorney's waterboarding and untimely death via a concoction of illicit drugs Reece had acquired to make the murder seem like a drug overdose, giving Reece the time he needed to eliminate his remaining targets.

Reece saw the horror in Captain Howard's eyes as he eviscerated the JAG officer with the sinister curved blade of the HFB karambit. As

his guts slipped through his fingers and spilled onto the soft jungle floor, Howard frantically attempted to shove them back inside. Reece skewered them to a tree and forced the lawyer to walk around the trunk, his entrails escaping from his stomach until he collapsed at its base to be eaten alive by the creatures of the swamp.

Reece thought of passing the vodka to General Quism Yedid in Athens, a glass spiked with a Novichok liquid-soluble precursor.

And he remembered filling the 60cc syringe with capsaicin to inject into Dimitry Mashkov to elicit information that led to the location of Oliver Grey.

“No,” Reece said.

“Have you used illegal drugs you have not mentioned previously?”

Reece shut his eyes, remembering the drugs his Troop had been given prior to their last deployment. Those PTSD beta-blockers had sinister side effects, side effects that a group of military, political, and private sector conspirators needed to cover up an ambush in Afghanistan and the murder of Reece’s family in their Coronado home.

“No.”

“Did you intentionally falsify information on your application or security paperwork?”

“No.”

“Have you ever stolen anything from your previous place of employment?”

Reece remembered rolling the dolly down the hallway to his Troop’s weapons locker in the SEAL Team Seven armory and loading it with rifles, NODs, AT-4s, LAW rockets, a machine gun, claymores, and C-4 to load out for his mission of vengeance. He’d liberated it all before the admiral and his JAG had suspended his security clearance.

“No.”

“Have you ever stolen anything worth over five hundred U.S. dollars?”

"No," Reece said, unsuccessfully attempting to block the vision of himself loading the stolen ordnance into the back of his Land Cruiser.

"Do you have any undisclosed relationships with foreign nationals?"

The faces of Ivan Zharkov, Marco del Toro, and Mohammed Farooq flashed through his mind.

"No."

"Have you ever kept a war trophy?"

Reece paused.

"No."

"Have you ever sold government property?"

"No."

"Have you, or do you know anyone who brought back enemy weapons from overseas?"

"No."

"Is there anything in your background that would disqualify you from getting this job?"

Reece remembered his best friend and former teammate, Ben Edwards, holding up the detonator attached to strands of det cord wrapped around investigative journalist Katie Buranek's neck, her head battered and bruised, tears streaming, bandana securing her mouth. Ben had watched in utter disbelief as Reece killed financier Steve Horn and the secretary of defense before centering his M4 on the CIA assassin's face and pressing the trigger, eliminating the final target on his terminal list.

"Mr. Reece?"

"No. Nothing."

"John" removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He then made a production of turning off the computer, though Reece knew quite well that it continued to monitor his vitals and that the audio and visual recording devices in the room were still running. He wondered who was watching through the two-way glass.

"Mr. Reece, this is not going well."

“Really? I’m shocked.”

“You must take this seriously. I have to tell you, almost every answer you’ve given indicated deception on the polygraph, even your name.”

“Well, I’ve used a couple aliases.”

“We covered this, Mr. Reece. Just any names not denoted on your employment questionnaire.”

“It’s been a busy couple of years, *John*.”

“Let me converse with my supervisors. I’ll be right back.”

“John” left Reece alone in the room, still tethered to the computer and still under surveillance.

Reece looked at the camera in the corner and shook his head.

Fuckers.

Reece knew the polygraph was largely theater. Yes, the machine measured blood pressure, breathing, sweat secretions, and muscle movements, but there was a reason that results of a “lie detector” test were inadmissible in every court in the civilized world. Its value was in making the candidate *think* it could detect deception. It was an expensive prop, one that had gotten more than one candidate over the years to admit to crimes that they would almost certainly have gotten away with otherwise.

Reece had visited the antipolygraph.org site years ago as part of a battlefield interrogation course he’d attended in the SEAL Teams. It was the approved “tactical questioning” course of instruction, meant to provide left and right limits to operators in the field who might not have the luxury of having a BIT, or Battlefield Interrogation Team, attached to their unit. The techniques taught at the approved interrogation school were more akin to how a detective would interview the suspect of a crime in the United States. Reece wouldn’t learn the darker arts of interrogation until he was detailed to a CIA covert action unit in Iraq at the height of the war. There he would learn techniques that had come in handy over the years, techniques that were not part of a manual and were not searchable via Google.

Reece shut his eyes.

Calm down, Reece. This is all part of the game, a game you need to win. Remember why you are here; you made a promise to Freddy Strain's widow.

"I'll find who did this, Joanie. I'll find everyone responsible."

The triggerman was still breathing; Nizar Kattan, a Syrian sniper Reece had vowed to put in the ground. An assassin Reece needed the CIA's robust intelligence capabilities to locate.

There was also the letter. A letter and a safe-deposit box key from his father. A letter from the grave.

Later, Reece. Just get through the day.

Reece's day had started early that morning with a blood draw. He had given a urine sample and completed his vision and hearing tests. He had an appointment at medical the following day to complete his physical. He'd taken the 567-question MMPI-2 psychological test, which he'd found both amusing and irritating. He would have to sit down with an Agency psychologist on his third day. Reece knew the MMPI was designed to uncover psychological issues that might be disqualifying to a candidate applying for employment with the Central Intelligence Agency. It was administered to uncover repressed aggression, psychoticism, alcoholism, anxiety, marital distress, fears, depression, anger, cynicism, low self-esteem, defensiveness, antisocial behavior, schizophrenia, and paranoia.

Paranoia.

Reece noticed that day two contained a long block of "free time" in his printed schedule. He knew this was a placeholder to "retake" the polygraph. Enough SEALs had gone through CIA processing over the years that it was anything but secret. Day three was set aside for an office visit with Victor Rodriguez, director of what was now called the Special Activities Center. The SAC ran the paramilitary wing of the Agency. Vic had tried to recruit him for Ground Branch at their very first meeting when Reece had landed on the USS *Kearsarge* in the Adriatic Sea after he and

Freddy Strain had taken out Amin Nawaz, the terrorist known as Europe's Osama bin Laden. Reece had agreed to finish the job he'd started at the behest of the United States government to track down and turn or kill a former CIA asset he'd worked with and befriended in Baghdad. That mission had led to Freddy's death from a sniper's bullet in Odessa.

His relationship with Katie had taken a bit of a hit when he'd disappeared into the Siberian tundra for six months, tracking the CIA traitor responsible for the death of Reece's father, a legendary Vietnam-era SEAL and Cold War CIA case officer. Reece glanced at the Rolex Submariner on his wrist, a watch that his father had purchased at the PX in Saigon, a watch that had been slipped from his dead hand in a back alley in Buenos Aires. Reece had taken it back from the man responsible before sending him to the afterlife with seven hundred grams of RDX from a Russian claymore.

The polygraph examiner had been gone for ten minutes.

Was he really meeting with a supervisor? No chance. They were just making him sweat. It was all part of the interrogation playbook: convincing unwitting subjects to admit to disqualifying crimes and thereby putting a feather in the cap of the polygrapher who "caught" them. They were especially fond of "catching" and disqualifying those with special operations backgrounds.

Katie had been supportive of Reece's decision to accept a provisional contract with the CIA. She had been with him from the start of the nightmare and helped uncover the conspiracy that led to the ambush of his SEAL Team in the mountains of the Hindu Kush and the slaying of his young daughter and pregnant wife. She'd waited and wondered when he disappeared off the coast of Fishers Island, New York, after saving her life, and she'd been by his side as he recovered from brain surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Their relationship had taken a romantic turn in the mountains of Montana before they'd been targeted on home soil by a Russian mafia hit team at the direction of Oliver Grey. She'd been through a lot, and even though she had been less than happy when he

went off the grid in Russia, she understood. Reece was on a mission, one that was not yet complete.

Reece heard the door mechanism click and turned his head to see the director of the CIA's Special Activities Center enter the room.

"Jesus, Reece, can't you do anything the easy way?" Victor Rodriguez asked.

Vic was second-generation Agency. He was a former Army Special Forces officer whose father had led a squad in Brigade 2506, the CIA-trained group of Cuban exiles that had attempted the 1961 overthrow of Fidel Castro in what would become known as the Bay of Pigs.

Vic had worked his way up through the ranks and had started recruiting Reece when he'd headed the Special Operations Group, the paramilitary side of what was up until 2016 called the Special Activities Division. He still preferred the older nomenclature. He was now responsible for SOG and the Political Action Group, two entities whose work was, more often than not, connected. The dark side of the Agency was in his blood. He'd grown up under the ever-looming specter of Bahía de Cochinos and had vowed to never again allow a failure at the nexus of intelligence and covert action. Victor Rodriguez was responsible for the third arm of U.S. foreign policy; when diplomacy and overt military pressure or intervention failed or was not possible for political reasons, the Special Activities Center was the *Tertia Optio*: the third option.

Vic had convinced Reece to sign on as a contractor and had put on the full-court press when Reece returned from Russia. He wanted the former frogman on board as a SOG paramilitary operations officer. In a late-night phone call a month earlier, Reece had agreed. This three-day screening was part of the process. If Reece passed, he would get an EOD, or Enter On Duty, date and then begin his training at the Farm.

"Can you just tell the twerp to finish up so we can get through this?"

"It doesn't work like that. We discussed the poly, Reece. You need to pass just like everyone else. How hard is it? Medical, dental, piss in a

cup, answer some questions. You have a presidential pardon, so even if you are technically lying on the exam you are actually telling the truth.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“No, but you have to do it. Isn’t that even some SEAL saying?”

“*You don’t have to like it, you just have to do it,*” Reece confirmed.

“Good. Just do it. You are being given a lot of leeway because of what you and Freddy did to save the former president. And even though it’s not officially recognized or condoned, there are rumors swirling about you taking out Oliver Grey. The Agency, and the counter-intel folks in particular, do not take kindly to turncoats in our midst. They missed Nicholson, Ames, and Grey. It’s rumored you gave Grey the sentence most of the Agency wishes on traitors.”

“I’m answering these as best I can, Vic.”

“They’re just counter-intel and lifestyle poly questions. You know the drill; your examiner will tell you to come back tomorrow. Play nice and let’s get you to the Farm.”

“Understood. Just tell ‘John’ to stop pissing me off.”

“Play nice,” Vic repeated before turning to exit the polygraph room. “And please don’t throw him through the two-way mirror. Those things are more expensive than you think.”

When “John” returned, Reece lowered his heart rate the way he would before taking a long-range sniper shot. He focused on Katie’s smile and answered with the correct yes and no answers. It wasn’t every day you got to beat a lie detector test.

Passing the polygraph meant Nizar Kattan was one step closer to death.

. . .

Two days later Vic sifted through Reece’s test results. No drugs in his system, no sexually transmitted diseases, vision and hearing well above Agency standards. It was the polygraph and MMPI test that concerned

him. The MMPI had resulted in paranoid and aggressive personality traits, which was not totally unexpected considering what Reece had been through over the past three years. Vic shifted his focus from the Multiphasic Personality Inventory to the polygraph.

IS YOUR FIRST NAME JAMES? FALSE POSITIVE

HAVE YOU EVER LIED TO GET OUT OF TROUBLE? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

DO YOU INTEND TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS TRUTHFULLY?

DECEPTION INDICATED

IS TODAY WEDNESDAY? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU EVER COMMITTED A CRIME FOR WHICH YOU WERE NOT CAUGHT?

TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

ARE WE IN VIRGINIA? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU EVER COMMITTED MURDER? DECEPTION INDICATED

ARE YOU A UNITED STATES CITIZEN? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN PART OF A GROUP THAT HAS WANTED TO
OVERTHROW THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT? DECEPTION INDICATED

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF A FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE
SERVICE? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU VISITED ANTIPOLYGRAPH.ORG TO PREPARE FOR THIS
EXAMINATION? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

ARE YOU SITTING DOWN? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU EVER COMMITTED MURDER? DECEPTION INDICATED

HAVE YOU EVER PLOTTED TO OVERTHROW THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

DECEPTION INDICATED

IS THE WALL WHITE? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INVOLVED IN THE TORTURE OF ENEMY COMBATANTS?

DECEPTION INDICATED

HAVE YOU USED ILLEGAL DRUGS YOU HAVE NOT MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY?

DECEPTION INDICATED

DID YOU INTENTIONALLY FALSIFY INFORMATION ON YOUR APPLICATION OR

SECURITY PAPERWORK? DECEPTION INDICATED
HAVE YOU EVER STOLEN ANYTHING FROM YOUR PREVIOUS PLACE
OF EMPLOYMENT? DECEPTION INDICATED
HAVE YOU EVER STOLEN ANYTHING WORTH OVER FIVE HUNDRED
U.S. DOLLARS? DECEPTION INDICATED
DO YOU HAVE ANY UNDISCLOSED RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOREIGN
NATIONALS? DECEPTION INDICATED
HAVE YOU EVER KEPT A WAR TROPHY? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE
HAVE YOU EVER SOLD GOVERNMENT PROPERTY? TRUTHFUL CONCLUSIVE
HAVE YOU, OR DO YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO BROUGHT BACK ENEMY
WEAPONS FROM OVERSEAS? DECEPTION INDICATED
IS THERE ANYTHING IN YOUR BACKGROUND THAT WOULD DISQUALIFY YOU
FROM GETTING THIS JOB? DECEPTION INDICATED
FINAL POLYGRAPH TEST RESULTS: INCONCLUSIVE

Vic closed the file and looked at the faded black-and-white framed photograph on the wall of his office. The men wore World War II-era “duck hunter” patterned camouflage uniforms and carried an assortment of small arms, including a Johnson M1941 held by Vic’s father.

Never again, Vic thought.

On the front cover of the file he signed his name over his director’s signature block and checked a box marked APPROVED.

CHAPTER 2

Angola, Africa

ANGOLA HAD NOT BEEN particularly good to Ismail Tehrani.

He was getting impatient.

It had been six years since he had left Lebanon to become one of the eight million diaspora—Lebanese citizens living beyond the borders. Unique to this group was that they vastly outnumbered their countrymen who stayed behind and continued to endure the chaos the past forty years had brought to the small republic on the Mediterranean Sea.

He missed his native country, but he was on a mission. He had been personally recruited by al-Sayyid Hassan. Well, not directly, but an order from an emissary of the secretary general of Hezbollah was as good as an edict from God; it was said that Hassan Nasrallah was a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad. Who was Ismail Tehrani to turn down an opportunity to serve Allah at the bidding of the man who had pushed the Israeli dogs from southern Lebanon?

Ismail was only a child when the Israeli rockets and artillery had rained down on the Shiite slums of South Beirut. Hunkered in a corner of their one-room apartment with his mother and cousins, they'd

lost electricity almost immediately yet did not risk lighting a candle. His mother had covered him with a thick blanket; the sound of the incoming bombardment and subsequent explosions were endured in darkness. The devastation he witnessed the following morning when he ventured outside cemented his resolve; he would defend his homeland from the invaders.

The war that saw more than four thousand Katyusha rockets fired into Israel and the destruction of critical infrastructure in Lebanon from Israeli warplanes did more than polarize the Arab world. It provided Hezbollah's Jihad Council with an army of young recruits willing to die for the cause. When his father returned from working in Africa to protect his family at the onset of the July War, Ismail remembered him saying that the president of the United States called the Israeli actions part of his "War on Terror" and that his Congress even voted in support of the Israeli onslaught. To Ismail and his family, it was nothing more than American-funded genocide.

Ismail's first taste of combat would surprisingly not be against the Israelis, as he so hoped, but instead against fellow Muslims in Syria, albeit *takfiris*. His brigade commander had explained that Hezbollah could not allow Syria to collapse and come under the control of the United States and Israel. Allah needed his warriors to be strong. Syria could not fall, especially in a Zionist plot to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Most of Hezbollah's weapons passed through Syria from Iran, and that conduit needed to remain open. It was their lifeblood. He'd heard whisperings that Nasrallah wanted to take territory and open another front against Israel in the Golan Heights. Ismail was in full support, parroting the slogans beaten into them by their instructors as they marched during indoctrination, and then in their more formal training in the west Bekaa Valley: "Death to Israel, Death to America, Eradicate the Jews."

Fighting in the Syrian town of al-Qusayr, Ismail found combat a confusing mix of screaming, shooting, and mayhem. He generally

pointed his weapon in the same direction as those in his brigade. He shot when they shot and ran when they ran. A friend he'd known since birth stepped on a land mine. They had not even stopped to pick up the pieces. Another warrior of God had taken a bullet to the face in mid-sentence as he stood to order his militia forward, leaving Ismail covered in chunks of bone and brain. Ismail had fought; he had not faltered. He drew strength from the passage written above their yellow and green flag depicting a fist clenching a rifle similar to the one in Ismail's hands:

fa-inna hizbu llāh hum algālibūn

Then surely the party of God are they that shall be triumphant.

Hezbollah won the day.

Ismail had heard whispers of Unit 910, Hezbollah's external security apparatus responsible for targeting Israeli assets abroad, but had never dared ask about or even speak of them. It was rumored they were also responsible for the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister, though Hezbollah denied the allegation and shifted blame to Israel.

When they pulled him from his unit, it was not so much an ask as it was an order. Ismail had been given a task, one that required him to receive additional training by the IRGC Quds Force in Iran.

The Quds Force is an elite paramilitary unit responsible for external operations specializing in the use of proxy forces unattributable to Iran. The West would brand them terrorists regardless of their targets. Born of the 1979 Iranian revolution, they were accountable only to the Ayatollah himself. Their intelligence apparatus taught Ismail how to assess and recruit assets, identify facilitators, set up safe houses, conduct reconnaissance and surveillance, and transfer information via a clandestine communications network back to Hezbollah.

And they taught him to build truck bombs.

The Party of God wanted Ismail in Angola. Though Hezbollah had

worldwide reach through its network of diaspora, they were under-represented in this southwestern African country, where the corrupt government had outlawed Islam, no doubt at the behest of the Jews. Mosques had been burned and Muslims persecuted. Hezbollah needed a trusted agent in the area to gather information for the Jihad Council. Israel's embassy in the capitol city of Luanda was a target, and Nasrallah wanted to know just how soft an objective it was. Finally, Ismail Tehrani would strike a blow against the Zionist aggressors.

Though a step up from the horrors of al-Qusayr, Angola was a country in transition. After a decade and a half of struggle in a war of liberation against the Portuguese colonists and a follow-on quarter century of civil war, the nation and its people were no strangers to conflict. Those years of strife had conditioned the new ruling class to exercise extreme measures to keep the populace in check. Disappearances of those critical of the Angolan government were commonplace. Torture, gang rape, and public executions were utilized as a means of controlling the populace. *This was Africa.*

Ismail was in the capital when, after thirty-eight years in power, President José Eduardo dos Santos finally stepped down. He had amassed a multibillion-dollar fortune in a country where the average person lives on two dollars a day. For the quasi-dictator of one of the most corrupt regimes in all of Africa, the ability to make \$32 billion in oil revenue disappear through a worldwide money-laundering network had been a highly profitable skill.

His King's College-educated daughter had risen to prominence and become Africa's first female billionaire as head of the nationalized Angolan state oil company. It certainly paid to take stakes in companies exploiting the Angolan people and their natural resources. Ismail had read of similar actions by the family of an American vice president; corruption and greed were not ailments relegated solely to the jungles of the developing world.

The northern Angolan province of Cabinda is separated from the rest of the country by a sixty-kilometer strip where the Democratic Republic of the Congo intrudes into what is de jure, though disputed, Angolan territory. Though lumber, cocoa, coffee, and rubber plantations occupy much of the lush landscape, Angola's most lucrative export is oil. It was into "the Kuwait of Africa" that Ismail followed in his father's footsteps. The mass exodus caused by more than half a century of war had created a labor vacuum. At the direction of Unit 910, Ismail applied for and was hired by an asset of the diaspora working at *Petróleo Brasileiro S. A. Petrobras*, the Brazilian Petroleum Corporation, a company with major stakes in Angolan oil and natural gas production. His job was to escort labor from Luanda in the south to Cabinda in the north, a position that allowed him ample opportunity to surveil the Israeli embassy.

Ismail was discouraged when his intelligence reports did not lead to immediate kinetic action. When in Luanda he prayed to Allah, not in a mosque but in a cramped apartment that smelled of sewage. He passed his information through the imam, who reported back to the council. He dreamed that one day the Jihad assembly would order him to carry out an attack on the Jews, just as his brothers had hit their embassies in Buenos Aires and London before Ismail was even born. Ismail had taken note when his fellow warriors martyred themselves in Bulgaria, though he intended on killing more than six Israeli tourists. He wanted to drive a truck bomb right into the lobby of the Israeli embassy. His death would one day be honored on a monument like the one his trainers had shown him in Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery in Tehran. That attack had meant something. Less than a year after the 1983 Beirut bombings, the infidels had retreated from Lebanon. The martyrs had struck a blow for Allah and sent the Americans scurrying home.

With each passing year, Ismail's hope of a glorious attack on the Jews in Angola dwindled. His recruitment by Unit 910 had been a great

honor, but at times he felt abandoned in the squalid African subcontinent, once again the little boy covered with a blanket.

When the assignment came to Ismail, it was not the one he expected. It did not entail acquiring the components to build a truck bomb for a spectacular attack for which he had been trained. It was a rather straightforward task, but one did not question orders from a descendant of the Prophet.

One evening after prayers the imam had given Ismail a package and verbally passed along his orders. Ismail was told the virus would only infect the Jews. Even so, there was a special pill for him to swallow that would ensure his safety. On his next trip north, he was to spray what looked like an asthma inhaler randomly in the marketplace of a local village. Hezbollah had information that the Israelis were secretly at work converting diamond mine workers to Judaism, all the while using the gems to fund their campaign of worldwide domination. Ismail expected nothing less of the Jews.

Three days later, he was en route to Cabinda with a new group of workers in one of the planes that Petrobras used to transport people to and from Luanda. The following afternoon he visited a marketplace just east of the city, a market that supplied workers for the Jews. He purchased a bracelet from a woman selling jewelry off a blanket of purple and orange and ate a meal of *chikwanga* and *catatos* from a vendor; he'd grown quite fond of the fried caterpillar dish; its spicy mixture of insects, onions, peppers, and tomatoes reminded him of the prawns from the coast of Lebanon.

Ismail depressed the asthma inhaler as he moved through the crowded bazaar at ten different places, just as he'd been instructed. Though he trusted his imam and the Hezbollah secretary general, he still took the special immunity pill: no sense in taking chances. He wanted to be sure he was healthy enough to destroy the Israeli embassy when the time was right.

Within thirty-six hours the local clinic in Cabinda began to

admit patients exhibiting flu-like vomiting, hemorrhaging in the eyes, and bloody noses very similar to the hemorrhagic outbreaks that had occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo just to the east in 2014 and 2016. The same clinic had experience with a rare episode in 2005 that killed thirty-nine children in a northern Angolan village.

The next day, dozens of infected villagers began flooding the clinic, prompting a notification to the World Health Organization. Having experience in this part of the world where hemorrhagic outbreaks were not out of the ordinary, this one was quickly contained. The doctors and nurses in equatorial Africa were well versed in hemorrhagic virus protocols. Personal protective equipment was mandated, bleach was used to disinfect all surfaces and equipment, and blood samples were sent to the Pasteur Institute in Dakar, Senegal, for further study. Though the index case was never identified, the data indicated that this was a small, contained outbreak in a crowded, hot market, probably originating with the meat handlers. It was catalogued as yet another in a long string of mysterious hemorrhagic viruses that plagued the Dark Continent.

Bodies of the dead were collected and burned in a mass crematorium, as was standard practice to destroy a fast-moving infection like Ebola. If there was a positive attribute of hemorrhagic viruses, it was that they burned themselves out quickly, often killing the host agent before they could spread the infection via blood or saliva. Thankfully, there had never been a recorded case of hemorrhagic virus spreading via respiratory pathways like the flu or a common cold.

The following day, Ismail returned to the capital, depressing his inhaler in the departure area of Quatro de Fevereiro International Airport, as per his instructions, before returning to his small apartment in time for evening prayers.

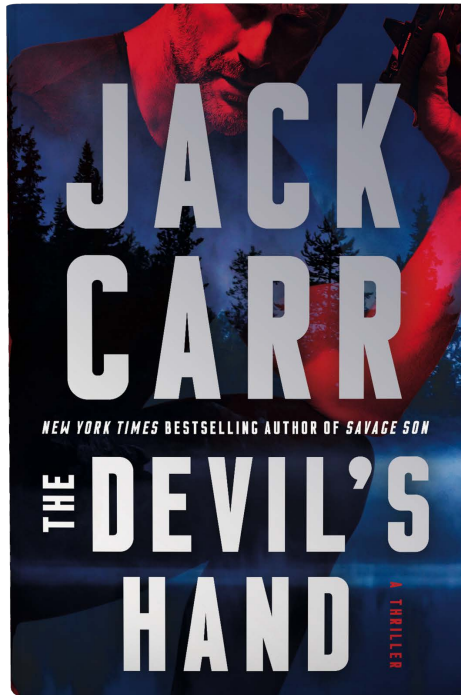
Less than twenty-four hours after the release, he took a taxi to Multiperfil Hospital, thinking he had food poisoning, maybe from his meal in Cabinda.

Ismail was dead the next day.

Three weeks later his name would be listed among 457 others in a World Health Organization report that was then forwarded to the Centers for Disease Control, or CDC. The report indicated the WHO had successfully contained another Ebola outbreak in Angola. Data like that was important to the continued financial support from the United States.

The name Ismail Tehrani would not spike on any intelligence agency radars, even if someone had run it through a national intelligence database in Israel or the United States.

His body was thrown into a pit, doused with gasoline, and set aflame, just another casualty of hemorrhagic fever, an infectious disease not uncommon in equatorial Africa.



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