

GAUNTLET

A NOVEL OF INTERNATIONAL INTRIGUE

RICHARD AARON

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO...

Beckie

“SO JUST HOW BIG A CRATER *will* it make if we blow up 660 tons of Semtex?” Richard asked Sergeant Hawken.

“No clue,” replied the munitions expert, surveying the Sahara beyond the ever growing pile of Semtex. “Nobody’s ever done anything this crazy before.”

Richard shook his head. “It makes sense, Hawk. Take all of this fucking plastic explosive that Libya has got stored up everywhere and just get rid of it, but look at the production that they’re making of it. Look at those reporters and gawkers. You’d think that Washington could just have quietly taken all of it to the middle of the Atlantic some place and blown it, but no. They turn it into a carnival.”

“Rich, I’ve got to focus here,” said the sergeant, shaking his head. He was busy threading and wiring fuses to complex switching routers and AmtechI timers that were ultimately connected, to the sergeant’s chagrin, to Richard’s laptop.

The warring remnants of the former Islamic Republic of Libya had finally put down arms. The nation was afloat on a sea of oil, and tapping that resource had become more attractive than murdering one another. One of the points that became important at the US-dominated negotiating table was that the vast supply of weapons that were on the loose in the former Republic ought to be destroyed; especially the horde of plastic explosives that the late Gaddafi had accumulated. The factions were required to yield up their stockpiles of the Czechoslovakian plastic explosive known as Semtex. How then would the Semtex be disposed of? That had the potential of becoming a billion-dollar exercise—until some bright wag in the Pentagon suggested the perfect solution. “Just cart the stuff to the middle of the Sahara and blow it the hell up. After all, it’s an explosive isn’t it?”

Thus it was that “Operation Plastic Sand” was born, with CIA operative Richard Lawrence as the point man. He was in charge of logistics and transportation. Hawken was in charge of “blowing it the hell up.” At that moment, they were busy receiving, unwrapping, inventorying, and reassembling the packets of Semtex at an abandoned landing strip near Bazemah, a tiny village in the heart of the Sahara. Most of the Semtex had been delivered by air in

a variety of planes. Some had also come by truck. The Semtex came in red cellophane-wrapped “bricks” that had been sold to Libya by Czechoslovakia in the 1970s; each were ten inches in length, four inches in width, and two inches in depth. There was 660 tons of it — approximately 600,000 kilos. Each brick was inventoried and turned over to the sergeant and his men for transport to the detonation site.

Richard Lawrence was a pilot who had flown for the navy and had involuntarily retired his wings to become a CIA field agent. “And we’re looking at what, several hundred thousand bricks?” he asked.

“Yup,” came the terse reply.

Richard looked at the growing pile, threaded with tangles of fusing wire. “Why all this fancy stuff, Hawk? Why not just fire an RPG into it and be done with it?”

Sergeant Hawken shook his head. “Where’d you do your basic training, Rich? You can’t just toss a grenade into 660 tons of Semtex. If you did that, most of this stuff would be blown free through the kinetic forces. Not all of the Semtex would be destroyed.”

“So what are we doing instead?” pressed Richard.

“Multiple blasting caps and fuses, together with Amtech timers, so that separate electrical signals are transmitted to the pile within a nanosecond of each other.”

“Right,” said Richard, flicking a fly off his laptop. “How big a blast will it be?”

The sergeant pulled a set of wire cutters from his tool belt and clipped some wires to precisely the same length. He sighed and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. It was midday and the temperature had climbed above 125. “We’re looking at two-thirds of a kiloton, the equivalent of a small nuclear blast.”

Richard hadn’t counted on the reporters, journalists, scientists, and curious locals that had started to assemble around them. The destruction of Libya’s Semtex stash was starting to make the front page.

This had further motivated the news stations, who were there in force. The moment of detonation was still two days away, but Bazemah had already seen a substantial increase in tourists, all waiting to see the “big bang.” Several movie studios had sent crews and cameras, for the sole purpose of shooting footage of such a large explosion. A festive atmosphere prevailed. The overriding concern shared by the news crews was that they would run

out of cold beer before the explosion. Richard grouched that more intelligence and logistics had gone into keeping the tourists with an ample supply of cold beer, in an Islamic country, than had gone into transporting and assembling the wad of Semtex.

The question about the size of the explosion, and specifically the size of the crater it would create, was starting to tease the airwaves. There were many predictions, and there was even a Las Vegas betting agency setting odds on the crater size.

Richard reflected on that. “How far back should they be?” he asked, referring to the pack of reporters and gawkers that was growing by the hour.

“You know, they are really pissing me off. Bring them in closer for all I care,” responded the sergeant.

“Seriously, Hawk. We don’t want an international incident here. How far back?”

“Tunisia maybe? Neptune? They didn’t teach us this stuff at Lawrence Livermore. They never assumed anyone would be this crazy. For all I know this could wobble the whole fucking planet on its axis. Two miles. Get them back two miles. At least.”

Richard already had a headache. He tried to ignore it, continuing to review the inventory lists that arrived with each new shipment, counting again and again the number of bricks, and entering them and various inventory control numbers into a spreadsheet on his laptop. “Goddamned bean counter now,” he muttered aloud, the corners of his mouth drawing down in a grimace. He longed for a return to his navy days when he was landing Tomcats on aircraft carriers. He had taken pride in his skills, but was devastated when, in his early thirties, he had splashed an F-14 in a tricky nighttime landing on the USS Johnny Reb. It was because his vision had started to deteriorate, ever so slightly, but the boys with stars and bars had a different notion. He clenched his teeth and swished his fingers through empty pockets.

INSPECTOR INDERJIT SINGH (everyone called him “Indy”), of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was watching the CNN coverage of Operation Plastic Sand on a small, twenty-year-old television set that was stuffed into a corner of his cluttered office. It was only 4:30 a.m., and the vast Surrey, BC headquarters of E Division was deserted but for a few obsessed officers suffering under impossible loads of insoluble cases. He shook his head in disbelief. “Tons,” he muttered to himself.

He had more pressing issues to attend to. Vast quantities of heroin had been appearing in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, California, and states further east. What was unique about this was that there was a high probability that the point of entry into the US was not Mexico, but British Columbia. There seemed to be no stopping it. No law enforcement agency on either side of the border was able to ascertain the means by which this was accomplished. The heroin was high quality. For two years Indy had been chasing the problem with little help, few resources, and an ever-increasing chorus of criticism from Ottawa and Washington. He shook his head as he watched the antics in Bazemah, not realizing that those events would come to touch him more closely than he could possibly dare imagine.

THE CONVOY CAME at the expected time. Two old Humvees. An even older Volvo ten-ton flatbed. The vehicles came rumbling down the Al Jawf Highway in Libya, surreal in the shimmering bands of heat. “Highway” was a misnomer since the road was just a rutted, single-lane trail, often disappearing completely beneath the shifting sands of the Sahara. The heat was unrelenting.

Izzy al-Din shifted from one foot to the other. “This should be easy,” he told his men. The location was perfect for an ambush—the roadway descended slightly and rounded a sharp curve. He and the three others assumed positions behind the rock formations that rose up on both sides of the highway. Their two Toyota pickup trucks were hidden by the craggy bluffs. The sun’s position was in their favor. There would be ten, he’d been told. Four in the lead vehicle, two in the Volvo, and four more in the trailing vehicle. Three American soldiers and seven Libyan soldiers. Izzy and his men communicated through collar microphones, and each carried a Heckler & Koch PSG1, equipped with a 6x Hensoldt scope. The rifles were accurate, auto-loading, and equipped with twenty-round magazines. The ammunition used had been modified to maximize their weapons’ killing power.

At Izzy’s signal, four rifles cracked. Four soldiers keeled over. Two soldiers in the last Humvee and the two soldiers in the Volvo were hit. Within a split second, four rifles fired again at the lead vehicle. A few more shots and it was done.

The men approached the vehicles. Barking a quick command at the others to check the bodies, Izzy pulled back the tarp slung over the Volvo’s deck and smiled as he saw row upon row of reddish cellophane-wrapped bricks. The two old Humvees were driven off the road and parked behind the same

rock formations that had hidden Izzy and his men. The bodies were pulled out of the Volvo and placed in the Humvees, and the Volvo, with its valuable cargo, was turned around. A new convoy formed, this time heading north-east—a Toyota in front, a Toyota in the rear, and the Volvo flat deck with the Semtex in the middle.

The three vehicles raced as quickly as the tattered roadway allowed, and within an hour they turned right, heading southeast on a barely visible goat path that serviced the desert oasis of Zighan. Another five miles and a weatherworn building came into view. Behind it sat a few single-engine craft and a neatly reconditioned DC-3. It had taken Izzy several days to find this isolated and rarely used airport, and a few American dollars to cover the bribe that would permit them to take off without a flight plan, no questions asked. When they arrived, the Volvo was backed up to the DC-3, and the four men worked quickly to transfer the bricks, row by row, to the cargo compartment of the plane. This would be the first of many transfers. One of the other men had already started the engines of the DC-3 when Izzy reached it, and within an hour the plane, loaded down with 4,300 kilos of Semtex, was on a southeastern course, headed toward the Sudan. Izzy reached for the satphone.

Three thousand miles and several time zones to the east, in a large hangar in Jalalabad, a phone was ringing. Three times, then a pause, then twice more. Then silence. It was the signal. Yousseff smiled to himself, put down his pipe, and leaned back in his chair. The plan was in motion.

2

AUGUST 10TH COULD NOT COME soon enough for Richard. The last of the convoys had arrived at midnight the night before. It was well past 2:00 a.m. before the last bricks had been unloaded at Ground Zero. He and Sergeant Hawken worked through the night, threading the fuses through the mass of Semtex.

Other military units had become involved. The Air Force Materiel Command had sent a detachment of six people, who had, to Hawken's frustration, stuffed a myriad of sensors into the pile. They'd also laid out further concentric circles of thermographic, electromagnetic, and percussion devices at various distances from Ground Zero. The Office of Naval Research had seen the coverage on CNN and sent their own team of experts to monitor the blast. Richard scoffed at that. Navy propellerheads getting their information from CNN.

To round it out, four Navy Nighthawk Helicopters, with support and ground crew, had been sent from the Theodore Roosevelt Battle Group, stationed in the Mediterranean, along with a small marine expeditionary unit to supplement the Libyan security forces.

"There are too many guys in uniforms running around here," grouched Richard. "That's how things go wrong." Everyone ignored him.

As zero hour approached, the anticipation became palpable. CNN tried to bring a helicopter into the area, but the Libyans wouldn't approve the use of the airspace. Hawken had been on the satphone with some of the engineers at Fort Gilles, and he told Richard that the observation post should be pushed back to five miles from Ground Zero. Various tribal, factional, and religious leaders had created a tent village and a security blanket had been thrown over the blast site.

With two hours left to go before the Big Bang, a team of frantic scientists from the Livermore National Laboratory arrived, begging for a twenty-four-hour postponement. They had spent billions of dollars in the past decade to study nonnuclear high explosives, and just a minor repositioning of the pile, and the insertion of a few hundred more sensors (which were absolutely on their way) would provide an extraordinary research opportunity. Richard told them to get lost.

Richard had the soldiers move the media camp back a few more miles. He went over the inventory sheets one last time, comparing the volumes of Semtex delivered to Ground Zero with the volumes dispatched from various bases scattered around Libya. Everything was on track with twenty minutes left to run.

Then he noticed it. Something didn't match.

"Wait a second, what's this?" he muttered to Hawken. He was looking at the Benghazi Marine Base tallies. More than 200 tons of the Semtex had been stored there, and some thirty-five truckloads were required to bring it to Bazemah. "Let's see," he continued. "Exactly 192,800 kilos in Benghazi. Thirty-five loads. Thirty-four tallies. Total, total...188,500 kilos from Tripoli...wait a minute..." The numbers were dancing off the pages in front of his eyes.

Hawken interrupted his thoughts. "Fifteen minutes to lift-off, Richard. We're wired up and ready to go."

"Good show, Hawk." Richard was starting to fret. His blurring vision was causing the fine print on the tallies and inventory sheets to drift in and out of focus. The eleventh-hour move from two miles back to five miles back had been irritating. The haste of the operation and the deadlines created by politicians for the benefit of the press had made for less-than-optimal planning. The magnitude of the task had been underestimated, and the delivery schedules were haphazard. The presence of the research teams and the growing satellite uplink village was too distracting. He looked again at the delivery tallies and inventories shipped. He was missing a sheet. He went back to the Humvee that had served as his base of operations. Surely it was there...

WHILE RICHARD WAS FRANTICALLY CLAWING through his delivery slips, Mike Buckingham, the senior CIA agent stationed at the American embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, received a disquieting message. He quickly read it, and with an "oh crap" forwarded it to the New Headquarters Building at Langley, Virginia. From there it was dispersed to various constituents of the US Intelligence Community, including a small but extraordinary agency known as the Terrorist Threat Integration Center.

TTIC (pronounced "tea tick") had been established on May 1, 2003, partially in response to the devastating 9/11 attacks. The concept behind the new agency was simple enough. Analysts from every agency in the US Intelligence Community received a steady stream of threat information obtained by their

agents and sources. Intelligence officers from every agency continuously slotted those pieces into an ever-changing factual mosaic. Information was probed, developed, questioned, validated, analyzed, and probed some more. While traditionally this information would go up the chain of command, now TTIC was copied into every such communication. TTIC also received reports from security agencies from other countries; MI-5 and MI-6 reports were received daily from the UK, and Israel's Mossad and Canada's security organization, CSIS, reported daily. All told, twenty-seven countries sent information on a regular basis. The people working with TTIC had distinguished themselves in their own intelligence agencies prior to their TTIC assignment. Generally, they were also individuals with highly developed computer skills. All in all, it was a brainy crowd with an incredible amount of information and processing power at their fingertips.

TTIC additionally had the capability to access millions of databases in countries throughout the world. Cellular phone, driving, and criminal records, large retail chain records, and GPS positions of vehicles and phones were at their beck and call. Hundreds of new databases were added to its vast addressing system daily. TTIC had access to trillions of bits of information—pieces that it could splice and parse in many ways at speeds measured in quadraflops. If someone bought a prescription in Miami, TTIC could sniff it out. If an individual applied for a fishing license in Australia, TTIC would hunt it down. In the digital economy, everyone left an electronic trail.

The system was powered by a cluster of experimental IBM computers that could out-process any other computing system on the planet, although very few people were aware of this fact. TTIC was located in a large-footprint, four-floor building on the outskirts of Washington, DC, a few miles south of Fort Meade. The top floor housed the huge TTIC Control Room—the eyes and ears of the organism. The room was built on a circular plan. The curved outer wall contained 128 large flat-panel displays, specially built by IBM, each with a diagonal measurement of approximately 303 inches. These screens could depict a stream of digital information that was accessible by the Intelligence Community, whether it was a satellite feed, an airport security camera, or the evening news.

Across the front of the room, the ring of 303s was bisected by one screen, worthy of a football stadium, some 64-feet wide and 36-feet high, but with a resolution of 16K, soon to be upgraded to 32K. With the switching technology built into the Control Room, any video or image could be placed on any screen anywhere within it.

The balance of the room consisted of two raised circular terraces with built-in desks, each with inlaid computers and display panels. Some of the stations had five or six additional independent display screens of various configurations and sizes. In all, there were forty such stations. There were two large, raised desks at polar opposites, one belonging to the director, the other to the deputy director. The center of the room contained a large, slightly convex, illuminated world map, some sixty feet across. The map was in fact a specially manufactured, interactive OLED display; if any portion of the map were clicked, detailed information appeared in a separate window, which could in turn be clicked for even greater detail. Using technology similar to the LCD mapping programs found in high-end cars, information could be drilled down to street level. Data about who lived, worked, or had significant connections in the area could also be brought up or displayed on any of the larger monitors on the front wall. It was a bit like a turbo-charged Google Earth, but live, using the vast network of military surveillance satellites, drones, and surveillance technologies that the US had in place throughout the world. The staff called it the "Atlas Screen."

Hamilton Turbee was one of those fortunate enough to be working with the elite systems at TTIC. He had been personally invited to join by the Senate subcommittee in charge of TTIC. Turbee didn't need the money. He didn't need the job. He was by nature resistant to authority and didn't mesh easily within an orderly bureaucracy. He was thin, pale, in his mid-twenties, and a brilliant mathematician with a Harvard PhD. He could have had a second doctorate in hacking were any university to issue such a degree. He identified most of his colleagues not by their facial features but by their footwear. He had been instrumental in the design of the database search and manipulation technology that lay at the core of TTIC's processing power.

Daniel Alexander, the TTIC director was stitched somewhat differently. He gloried in his family wealth; he'd spent more than twenty million on a mansion on 600 acres in Connecticut and fifteen million on a condo in Washington, DC. He had an undergraduate degree in history from Yale and a law degree from that same institution. But while most students worked diligently, Dan had never exhibited that inclination. He threw money around liberally, having other students do his term papers and take notes for him in class. He spent many of his school hours on the golf course and in the bars, either practicing his chip shot or bedding women.

He enjoyed the sense of connection and power brought by his family name. He had thought briefly about joining the military, the traditional occu-

pation of his forebears, but abandoned that idea when he realized how much work was involved and that there appeared to be attenuated opportunities for short cuts.

Like so many playmakers, Dan eventually found that wealth and pleasure were not enough. Power was the ultimate aphrodisiac. He had obvious designs on the presidency and was looking for a post that would vault him to national prominence. He practiced staring those he was addressing directly in the eye, but his baleful glare had nothing to do with honesty.

Hamilton Turbee, on the other hand, was a straightforward mathematician and programmer. If someone looked him in the eye it felt as though a needle had been poked in it. He and Dan were destined for conflict from the start. Turbee had no intelligence background and had no desire to climb to high governmental positions. He did not know what a corridor of power was, let alone how to navigate it. The politics that seeped into every nook and cranny of DC was so alien to him that he was oblivious to its existence or function. Turbee had been managed over his young life by a village of doctors, amongst who there was no agreement as to what, if anything, afflicted him other than that he was on a spectrum of this or that. He was totally lacking in social skills. He was born with repetitive motion problems in his right arm. He couldn't tolerate loud noises and hated being "outside." He was able to make himself tolerable to others (according to his mother) only through a rich cocktail of antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and stimulants. Without this medicinal support, his mother claimed, he would have spent his time "bouncing off the walls." Dan, on the other hand, stuck to alcohol and cocaine. He had a PR firm on permanent retainer, in the event that his perambulations crossed the line into criminality or beyond the pale of decency, which in fact was a regular occurrence. Turbee did not know what "PR" was. The two did not see eye to eye on anything.

"Johnson, put that Buckingham message on all of the 303s," barked Alexander. "And turn off that goddamn CNN feed from Libya." Johnson was Dan's "executive assistant," although "fixer" would have been a better word.

"We'd better have a talk about this," Dan said to the members in the TTIC Control Room. He looked at his watch, irritated at the inconvenient timing of the message. It was 2:00 p.m., approaching his tee-off time.

"I've got it!" yelled Turbee, in obvious triumph. "It'll be 458 meters across, 27 meters at its deepest point, providing the Semtex is properly detonated." He was chewing on the remnants of a burrito as he was talking.

"Turbee, what the hell are you ranting about now?"

“The crater, Mr. Alexander. The size of the crater. You know, the hole in the desert in Libya. There’s this big betting pool in Las Vegas on how big the crater will be, and I’ve been able to apply some discrete fluid mechanics equations to the vectors—”

“Stuff it. We’ve got serious shit happening, and we don’t care about the size of some crater.”

“Email it in anyway,” whispered Khasha, who worked at the station next to Turbee. “Ignore the pompous ass.”

“Well, why not?” he whispered back. The pool had been growing rapidly, and the winner would stand to make a tidy sum. Within seconds, Turbee had sent in his estimate on the crater size and made a bitcoin bet.

“This came in less than ten minutes ago,” Dan continued. “The transmission is from the CIA station in Islamabad. The source is Zak Goldberg, who is the CIA’s top asset in Afghanistan. He’s been operating undercover there for close to four years. Buckingham, the embassy chief in Islamabad, is of the opinion that this message should be considered solid and accurate information with a high degree of reliability. Turbee read the message, which he had placed on one of the many computer screens on his desk:

MAJOR TERRORIST STRIKE AGAINST USA IN ADVANCED PLANNING
STAGES WILL BE PUT INTO EXECUTION WITHIN DAYS LIKELY DATE OF
ATTACK EARLY SEPTEMBER POSSIBILITY ATTACK WILL BE BY WATER
WILL CAUSE ENORMOUS DAMAGE TO PROPERTY AND TAKE MANY
LIVES EMIR SAYS COULD DESTABILIZE USA PASHTUN DRUG

That was it. The message stopped mid-sentence. For a few moments, silence reigned in the Control Room. At length, Dan broke the tense calm. “It came from an undercover operative by the name of Zak Goldberg. Johnson, get Buckingham on the line.”

After fifteen minutes, Johnson gave up. Apparently the president, the secretary of defense, the heads of the CIA, FBI, and NSA, and many others, ranked ahead of Dan’s agency. All those who could do so had pulled rank to get to the station chief in Islamabad. As Dan fumed about life’s slights and inequities, George Lexia, a Silicon Valley engineer, also non-military, but instrumental in designing the Atlas Screen, raised his voice. “Yo, Dan.”

“What?” snapped Dan.

“It says here that he had a close friend, the guy in charge of the Semtex operation in Libya. You know, the Plastic Sand thing.”

“So?” asked Dan.

“We were all just watching him on TV. He’s in charge of the project. Maybe you can get him.”

“Johnson, dial him up,” came the command.

George was sitting on the other side of Turbee. “I’m gonna blow this joint, Turb,” he said. “Danno here is too stupid to run a popsicle stand.”

“Shhh, Dan, don’t say stuff like that,” said Turbee quietly.

Five minutes later, Richard answered his phone. The call was routed through TTIC’s state-of-the-art Control Room speaker system.

“Richard, this is Dan Alexander of TTIC. Could I ask you—?”

“T-who?” came the impatient voice across the complex Control Room speaker system.

“TTIC,” repeated Dan. “The Terrorist—”

“Sorry. Don’t want any. I’m in the middle of important stuff here.” There was a sharp click as Richard hung up.

There were eye rolls from almost everyone except Turbee. This was humor he could recognize; this was pure Homer Simpson. His shrieking laughter cut through the silence in the room.

“Turb, shut the fuck up. Johnson, get that asshole back on the line.”

“Sorry, sir,” said Turbee, reddening.

In due course, Johnson did get Richard back on the line. This time Liam Rhodes, TTIC’s deputy director led the charge.

“Richard, you know Zak Goldberg better than anyone. He’s given us some disconcerting information about a possible terrorist strike. I can’t go into details with you here and now, but can you tell me your view as to the reliability and the quality of intel passed along by him?”

“Sure, that I can answer. I’ve been in this business for years. I’ve known Zak all my life. We grew up together at the Islamabad embassy. There is no one finer, none more careful. He’s doing what he’s doing right now because he is the best. If he says there’s going to be a terrorist attack, and gives you chapter and verse, then it’s going to happen, unless you stop it. Period.”

Similar validation was being received up and down the command chain.

3

THE COUNTDOWN HAD COMMENCED. The audience was diverse and colorful, consisting of the locals from Bazemah (most of the town had turned out) and military people from both Libya and the US. There were reporters, scientists, engineers, politicians, videographers, photographers, and gawkers. An archipelago of satellite uplink stations dotted the five-mile perimeter. A festive atmosphere prevailed.

Richard, however, was far from festive. He was anxiously sorting through the inventory sheets. He checked the sheets against the inventory spreadsheet that he had on his laptop. He downloaded Hawken's inventory counts. He obtained the shipping inventories from the Benghazi base. Forty-six trucks had been dispatched over seven days. Had forty-six arrived? The numbers kept drifting off the pages. Every time he divided or multiplied or added or subtracted the numbers changed.

The omnipresent headache had intensified, and various combinations of medications could not arrest its crescendo.

IT WAS STILL PREDAWN at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) complex. Indy smiled as he hung up his telephone. An amazing lead had just fallen into his lap. He had been speaking with Catherine Gray. She was thirty years old and already a corporal, running the drug section in the Kootenays, tucked away in the town of Cranbrook in the mountains of the southeast corner of British Columbia. She was at work at 6:00 a.m. and was as obsessed with finding "the hole" in the border as Indy was. Now maybe, just maybe, she had found something.

"We had a strange situation out of Fernie last week," Catherine told Indy. Fernie was a small but scenic mountain town near the Alberta and Montana borders with BC.

"A man named Benny Hallett showed up at the local clinic with a grossly infected knee. Osteomyelitis, that's what the doctors said. A bone infection. He'd been involved in some kind of accident. Somehow he shot himself, or someone shot him in the knee. He was moved to Vancouver General. He's there right now. And someone torched his truck. I know the Halletts. I am absolutely convinced they're running drugs big time, but I've never been able to prove it."

When she elaborated, Indy was definitely curious. "I'll check him out," he said. He was in such a rush to grab his coat and get out the door that he forgot to turn off his small television. "Seven, six, five..." chanted the CNN reporter.

Vancouver General Hospital was a forty-minute drive into Vancouver. He grabbed a squad car, activated the lights and sirens, and was at the hospital in less than twenty.

IT WAS 9:00 A.M. IN WASHINGTON, DC. Turbee had stumbled in to work ten minutes earlier. He was paler than usual, and there were deep black circles under his eyes. He hadn't gone out, partied, or got wrecked. He just hadn't slept. Sleep was never easy for him.

Most of the TTIC staff was working by 7:00 a.m. Unless there was an emergency, NSA monitored the system during the night. Dan had arrived at 9:45 and was scowling. The director glanced up coldly as Turbee entered, one shoelace untied, and unshaven. Was he wearing the same clothes as yesterday? Did he sleep in those jeans? Did he ever even comb his hair? Dan's disapproving observations were short-lived as the countdown on the other side of the planet reached its final stages. The large central screens all showed the unfolding drama in Bazemah. One screen was tuned to CNN, two others to BBC and Libya's own national television network. The countdown was in full swing.

"Four, three, two..."

THE LOWER SIKARAM CAVES were well lit. They had been created millions of years earlier by mountain runoff penetrating the softer limestone, carving out a cave system that reached for endless miles and to unknown depths. The supply of water was plentiful and pure, and the power generated by the waterfalls was ample and reliable. Miles of electrical cable ran through the tunnels, distributing the electrical power where needed. Yousseff had first come to know the Emir when he and his engineers installed the power system.

The cave system's lower entrance was only twelve miles south of an ancient smuggler's trail but was impossible to find without one of the local guides. The main cave opening was hidden beneath cliff formations and foliage and was used sparingly. Its occupants were constantly surveying the skies for the Drones of the enemy. They knew that the Great Satan was corrupt and morally bankrupt, but devilishly clever.

The people who tended the Emir lived in these caves. There was a large kitchen, stocked with many provisions. There were sleeping quarters for soldiers and servants in the various smaller caves. The tunnels and caves perpetuated endlessly.

Enough ammunition and materiel to sustain a dozen battalions was stored there. The caves had also given the local peasants shelter from many an invading army and were set up to take in a large number of people with little or no advance notice. Any invader gained control only of the plains and river valleys. The Pashtun people—Yousseff's people, Izzy's people—had never been controlled or ruled by anyone. They had not been conquered or dominated by Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the English, the powerful and mechanized Soviet Army, or the Americans with all their fabulous war technology. The caves were vast and complex, under the sole dominion of the Pashtun mountain people. Many countries had conquered Afghanistan; none had conquered these mountains, the caves within them, or the people who took shelter there.

The upper caves were more than a mile removed from the lower entrance and over 1,000 feet higher. The routes were complex; there were many paths and tunnel openings along the climb. Only the experienced guides knew the route. The Emir made this walk daily. The upper cave system opened onto the northeastern wall of the mountain and provided a breathtaking view of the Kabul River Valley, with Kabul in the distance and the soaring Hindu Kush beyond. It broke into a cliff wall that was more than 3,000 feet in height and was so sheer that no man had yet climbed it. The opening was more than 20 feet wide and 10 feet high, and the cliff wall angled out over it, making the cave invisible from the sky. Only a low flight pass through the valley, with dangerous and unpredictable crosswinds and along precisely the correct angle, would reveal it. Even then it appeared to be only an innocent recession in the cliff wall. The Emir had spent many hours on this very cliff edge, in solitary study and silent meditation, without fear of discovery. There was seldom any activity in this highest reach. It was here that Yousseff met the Emir.

When Yousseff entered the chamber, he found the Emir sitting robed and cross-legged on the floor, his beard long, his one living eye a deep black orb, recessed in a crevassed face. The other eye was white and dead, burned and destroyed by torturers many years earlier. He sat with his Egyptian and Pakistani engineers. Heavily armed guards stood around the outer perimeter.

The Emir saw Yousseff appear in the doorway and motioned for him to sit down. The cave floor was richly carpeted, and tapestries hung on the

walls. It was lit with soft lights, creating fleeting reflections on weathered tribal faces. One set of electrical cables ran along the wall leading to the other caves. Yousseff observed all of this silently, refamiliarizing himself with the upper cave system, and sat down across from the Emir.

The Emir had been born Gul Zhar Samaradan. As a child he studied in the Madrassas in Pakistan, but in the early '80s, he had joined with many of his colleagues and taken up arms against the invading Soviets. He fought courageously and well and was held in high regard by his clan when the Soviets left. He was instrumental in the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. Then, in the wake of the Twin Tower attacks, he'd been captured by the Americans. It was thought at the time that he knew the whereabouts of several of the terrorists responsible for the planning of the attacks. The Americans sought to extract this information from him, but to no avail. The CIA eventually decided to send him to a military base in Uzbekistan. The secret police of that nation were advanced and very effective in the art of questioning. Had the world known of the existence of America's surrogate torturers, or what they did, there would have been UN resolutions by the score.

The Emir had ultimately escaped but not before losing, in a most painful way, the toes from both feet, a number of fingers, and the sight in one eye. His back was a mass of scars, and his genitalia were covered with the scars of third-degree electrical burns. He returned to the mountains of the Sefid Koh a changed man, harder, more determined, and consumed with rage against the Americans.

This was the man now sitting across from Yousseff. For several minutes after his entrance, no one spoke. Yousseff was intently studying the plans and diagrams he had been handed and hadn't yet greeted the others. At length, the Emir broke the silence.

"Can you do it?" the Emir asked Yousseff.

"Yes, I think I can. We already have the Semtex. But this will take much planning, and many people will be involved," Yousseff replied. His face remained passive, but his brain had kicked into overdrive. The possibilities. The magnificent possibilities. When he had first received the messages from the Emir, inviting him to take control of this mission, he had been skeptical. He had put some of his people to work on it. With the pieces the Emir already had in place, and the connections and funding Yousseff himself possessed, he realized that the plan could succeed. He also realized that he could make a fortune in the execution of the mission. It had all started with the theft of the Semtex. This hadn't been difficult. The Emir's tendrils ran far afield and were

powerful enough to find supporters within Libya's Benghazi Marine Base, the warehouse where a substantial portion of the Semtex had been stored. From the point of the theft, it would be a race against time. His people would be running a gauntlet, focused on a destination that would take them through dangers too numerous to mention. But it could be done.

Yousseff was here to finalize the arrangements and to start negotiations regarding control of the mission and payment for his time and efforts. He didn't tell the Emir that he had already set his own pieces in motion.

"We have six people undercover in California," the Emir said, interrupting Yousseff's thoughts. "Four of them have been in place for many years. Here is the name of the leader, his telephone number, and the code sequence. They are licensed and have experience driving large trucks." The Emir handed Yousseff a sheet of paper with the information. "The other two live at the Grand Mosque of South Los Angeles. Here is the number of their caretaker. You should use them for any delivery needs."

"Thank you, this will help." Yousseff tucked the folded sheet of paper into a pocket. He looked at the blueprints and then at the engineers. "If we execute this properly this will work?"

"Yes," replied the Emir. "But the tolerances must be exact. There can be no deviation. Even a change by as little as a fraction of a millimeter could cause a malfunction."

Yousseff looked at the Emir. "I can have the weapon built. I will use your people to deliver the explosives. If your engineers are correct, I can do the rest."

"I can assure you, Yousseff, that if you build the weapon precisely according to these specifications and place it where we say it should be placed, the Great Satan will be brought to its knees. We have obtained the weapon design directly from Livermore Laboratory in the United States."

"A large part of America will fall into chaos, and the loss of life and property will be significant. It will far surpass what our warriors have already done," said the Emir. He gazed directly at Yousseff with a smoldering look. "Far surpass."

Yousseff shook his head at the madness that burned in the man's eye. He was not doing this for religious or political reasons and could not understand those who did. "I will have great expenses and will incur grave risk. Any of my men may be injured, incarcerated, or killed," he replied in soft and even tones. "My ships might be seized, my airplanes shot down. Men have already died. I require funds for this operation."

The Emir grimaced as though he had just swallowed something bitter. It is always about the money, he thought to himself. Always money. He looked at Yousseff, his one eye blazing. "How much?"

"Twenty-five million American dollars," Yousseff answered, his face showing no emotion whatsoever. "To be transferred to this account as soon as your messengers can do it." He handed the Emir a sheet of paper with banking particulars.

"It will be done before the sun sets today," the Emir confirmed.

Yousseff considered for a moment. "I will require details of the engineering plans," he said at length.

One of the engineers handed Yousseff a flash drive. "Everything is on this," he said.

Yousseff reached for it and smiled. "Thank you." He waited silently for a few moments. Then he spoke again. "There is something else I need."

"What is it?" asked the Emir.

"It is a simple matter, especially for these people and their computers. I need information to start floating about on the Internet. I need the Great Satan to be looking for us elsewhere. I need the Americans looking to the south when I will be traveling north. They need to look west when I will be east."

One of the engineers nodded. "We can do this," he said.

"And can you convince the faithful from other countries to collaborate?" asked Yousseff.

The reply was quick in coming. "Yes, we can."

"I will need someone with great computer skills. I need to plant false trails when the Americans come. I need the best you have," added Yousseff, stroking his forehead.

Two of the engineers looked at each other, nodded. "We have such people."

"And who do I use for the media?"

"His name is Mahari. From Islamabad," said the Emir.

"Good. Send him to my Islamabad hangar tomorrow morning."

The Emir nodded. He motioned to one of the young guards who stood on the outside of the chamber. "Go to Jalalabad," he barked in sharp tones. "Immediately. Go to our people there. Give Mahari instructions. Have them wire funds into this account." He handed the note to the guard.

"Yes, Emir," came the sharp retort, and the young man was gone.

Yousseff was already bidding farewell and readying himself for the long trek back to the Jalalabad hangar. He traveled alone, steeped in his thoughts.

A golden opportunity had presented itself. The Emir wanted to destroy, to create chaos for the Great Satan, to wage jihad. He could give the Emir what he desired, and in the process, he could vastly increase his own wealth and empire. If this gambit were to be successful, there would be huge swings in the world marketplaces—trillion dollar swings. He, and only he, would have advance knowledge of the exact date and time. The possibilities...the endless possibilities. He needed to think, to chase the dragon, to plot things out in the fluidity of opium dreams...

...Yousseff was thirteen. His mother and uncle were ill, and his father did not want to leave either. Twenty kilos of opium had been gathered. The family needed the sixty or seventy dollars that this sale would bring in the markets of Peshawar.

“Go,” Yousseff’s father had said to him, over the objections of his mother. “Go. We need money for supplies. For food. Go, and may Allah be with you.”

Without a further word, Yousseff had saddled one horse, placed the saddlebags across a second, and rode toward the mountains that rose impenetrably behind the home of his uncle. Izzy al-Din, his faithful sidekick, had wanted to come with him.

“Not this trip, Iz. Too dangerous. Maybe next time. But come with me, ride to my uncle’s place, then you can go back from there.”

Izzy was content with this, and they had a pleasant, easy ride to the edge of Jalalabad and up the trail that ultimately led to the treacherous mountain pass, the Path of Allah.

After Yousseff sent Izzy home, he had stopped at the home of his uncle and told him of the trip. He had asked if there was any opium there and learned that his uncle had about ten kilos and was planning to make the trip himself in a week or two. Yousseff volunteered to take it; he had already become familiar with the many smuggling paths and uncharted horse trails through the Hindu Kush and the Sefid Koh. His uncle had seen for himself the sureness of the boy’s steps in traversing the perilous higher passes with him in earlier

years. He had seen the bright spark of intelligence in Yousseff's eyes and had nodded approvingly as the boy became acquainted with the Pashtun smuggling ways. Yousseff never needed to be told anything more than once.

"Yes," he had said. "Take these ten kilos. Bring me the money in American dollars."

Yousseff asked if he could use a third horse. The boy had been gone for hours before it occurred to his uncle that this seemed a strange request, given Yousseff's meager thirty kilos of opium, which could be packed onto one horse. There was no need for three.

The Path followed increasingly steep terrain, deep in the Sefid Koh. It reached a point more than 8,000 feet above the Kabul Gorge. At that point, the trail leveled out and traversed rolling slopes until it reached a precipice that plunged nearly 2,000 feet. Here the Path of Allah became a narrow trail that was in some places only three feet wide, and never grew to be more than five or six feet in width. This cliff was theoretically the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but no army had ever enforced it, and no monarch or government exercised dominion there.

Storms could come on unexpectedly at this elevation, and even in the hot summer months a foot or two of snow could fall within a few hours. Ice was common, and the Path was often wet and slippery. Even experienced horses needed to be blindfolded or blinkered, and it was still possible that they would panic, rear up, and lose their footing, plummeting to their deaths almost half a mile below. Each year saw several horses and men fall to their deaths along the dangerous and precipitous route. For a boy to travel it alone, with three horses, was unheard of.

For almost a mile, the treacherous path rose and fell until it reached the ancient fortress of Inzar Ghar. Built on a foundation that was more than 1,000 years old, this fortress served as a storage area for opium, an armory, and a dungeon. In order to enter Pakistan via the Path of Allah, one had to pass through the gates of Inzar Ghar. This

was no obstacle, as near relatives from Jalalabad owned the fortress. From there it was another day's journey down more gentle terrain to Peshawar.

The weather had been with young Yousseff on the journey. His trip, with three horses in tow, had been uneventful. In nearly record time, he found himself in the bustling and historic city of Peshawar, Pakistan. Here Yousseff departed from the script. He sold the ten kilos for his uncle, but not the twenty belonging to his father, to their usual dealer in the Peshawar market, for two dollars and fifty cents per kilo. Twenty-five dollars. With that money he went down the crowded streets with his three horses, bumping into horse-drawn carts, rickshaws, bicycles, and motorcycles, following the Cantonment, along Railway Road, and entering the Khyber Bazaar. Walking along a series of crooked back roads and alleys, he reached a business that to the untrained eye appeared to sell carpets. The initiated knew that this particular shop was a front for dealing in the chemicals required to reduce opium to heroin. He knew exactly what was required: calcium hydroxide, liquid ether, ammonium chloride, acetic anhydride, and a few other sundries. He purchased what he needed and loaded the chemicals onto his second and third horses. He traveled a short distance back into the mountains. He had made another friend there, Ba'al Baki, who was also about thirteen years of age. On their many trips through this area, he, his father, and his uncle had often stopped at the small homestead owned by Ba'al's parents. They were loquacious people, friendly and giving. The travelers would often eat dinner there and attempt to pay them. This always became a friendly argument, since melmastia, the Pashtun code of hospitality, required people to accommodate all travelers without any expectation of reward. The casual acquaintance had soon grown into a firm friendship between the two families, and Yousseff was happy to make his way back to the homestead.

It was a hot summer afternoon when he arrived. He left his three horses tethered a short distance away and went ahead to meet Ba'al. He told the other boy about his plan in hushed and hurried tones and invited him along. He would cut Ba'al in, of course. Ba'al begged his parents for permission to accompany Yousseff for a few

days, and they agreed. They had few concerns about Ba'al spending time with Yousseff.

The two friends had gone to an abandoned farm about ten miles from the homestead and had given themselves three days to attempt to convert the remaining opium to heroin. Together, they placed an empty fifty-five-gallon oil drum on bricks about a foot above the ground and built a fire under the drum. They added thirty gallons of water to the drum and brought it to a boil. After a leisurely cup of afternoon tea, they added the twenty kilograms of raw opium that Yousseff had not sold at the marketplace.

Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, Yousseff and Ba'al went through more than thirty steps, including filtering, adding chemicals like ammonium chloride and sodium carbonate to the mixture, then purifying and purifying again to produce heroin. It was a very complex process, which Yousseff had learned only through watching the elders and listening to their stories.

After they were done, Yousseff had taken their product of fifteen kilos of heroin and gone directly to the docks, where the Kabul River carved its way through Peshawar. Without much ado, he sold the heroin to a riverboat captain for \$1,500, which made his profit more than \$1,400. He paid Ba'al \$50 and bid his friend goodbye. But not before he had loaded all three horses with more of the precursor chemicals.

Upon his return from that first trip, he had paid his uncle the \$25 and his father \$50. With the remaining \$1,275 he purchased a small twelve-acre spread of fertile opium-producing land. He had agreed to pay the owner a further \$500 within four months. Over the next two months, he worked night and day in the fields, personally scoring the opium buds and collecting the resin.

He enlisted the aid of some of his relatives, paying them more than the going rate for a day's labor in the fields, but mostly he performed the work by himself. Izzy pitched in for free, incredibly pleased to be helping Yousseff. At the conclusion of the harvest, they had fifty kilos

of cooked opium. Yousseff built a small platform behind his uncle's home, and with the help of Izzy, converted the opium into forty kilos of heroin. This time he took a team of ten horses, and a number of his cousins and friends, and made the trip back to Peshawar. After expenses, he netted \$4,000, \$500 of which he used to pay off his debt on the property, \$250 was used to pay for the labor and other expenses, \$250 for more chemicals, and \$3,000 of which was used for purchase of another fifty acres of farmland.

By the time Yousseff reached his fourteenth birthday, he owned more than 400 acres of land. Ba'al, following Yousseff's lead and at his friend's suggestion, had purchased an additional ten-acre spread near his parents' home. This land was also used for opium production. At this point, one trip to Peshawar netted more than \$15,000 American.

By the time he reached seventeen, he owned thousands of acres of prime opium-producing lands and had built a safe, well-ventilated building in which the heroin could be processed into opium. His trade grew exponentially. He developed a reputation for safety and paid more than the going rate for his workers. He provided doctors if they were injured and was working on a school so that the younger children could gain some education...

The gentle neighing of his horse snapped Yousseff out of his reverie. He was approaching the outskirts of Jalalabad.

Three thousand miles to the east, a string of zeroes flashed across Richard's computer.