

FUSE

OF ARMAGEDDON

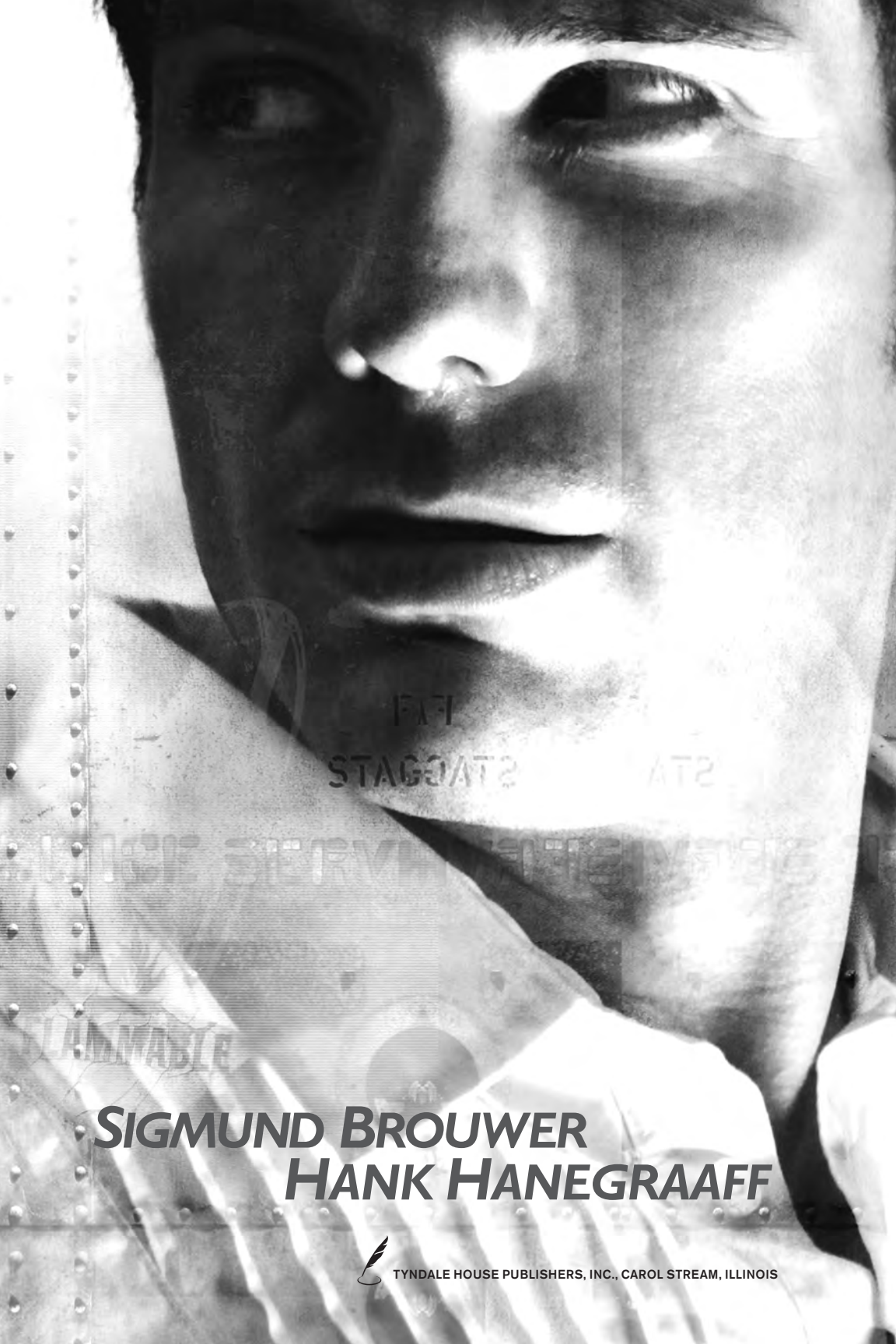
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SIGMUND BROUWER
HANK HANEGRAAFF



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Fuse of Armageddon

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“. . . the Lobby’s campaign to squelch debate about Israel is unhealthy for democracy. Silencing skeptics by organizing blacklists and boycotts—or by suggesting that critics are anti-Semites—violates the principle of open debate upon which democracy depends. The inability of the U.S. Congress to conduct a genuine debate on these vital issues paralyzes the entire process of democratic deliberation. Israel’s backers should be free to make their case and to challenge those who disagree with them. But efforts to stifle debate by intimidation must be roundly condemned by those who believe in free speech and open discussion of important public issues.”

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER (University of Chicago) and STEPHEN M. WALT (Harvard University), “The Israel Lobby”

“[Dispensationalists once] sat high in the bleachers on history’s fifty-yard line, watching as various teams took their positions on the playing field below and explaining to everyone who would listen how the game was going to end. For the first one hundred years of their movement, then, they were observers, not shapers, of events. But all that changed after Israel reclaimed its place in Palestine and expanded its borders. For the first time, dispensationalists believed that it was necessary to leave the bleachers and get onto the playing field to make sure the game ended according to the divine script.”

Historian TIMOTHY WEBER, On the Road to Armageddon

ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

GAZA STRIP

Gaza

Khan Yunis

LEBANON

SYRIA

Lake Tiberias
(Sea of Galilee)

GILEAD

West Bank

Tel Aviv

Jerusalem

TEMPLE MOUNT

ISRAEL

JORDAN

Negev

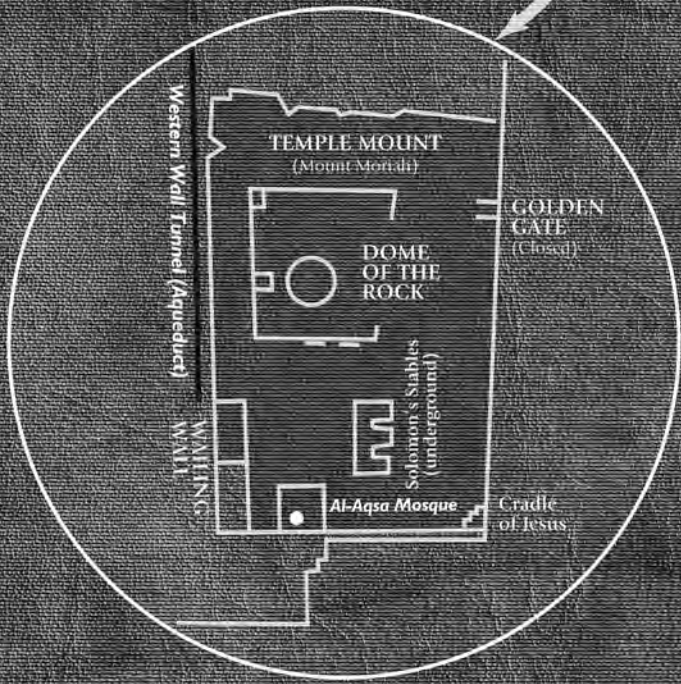
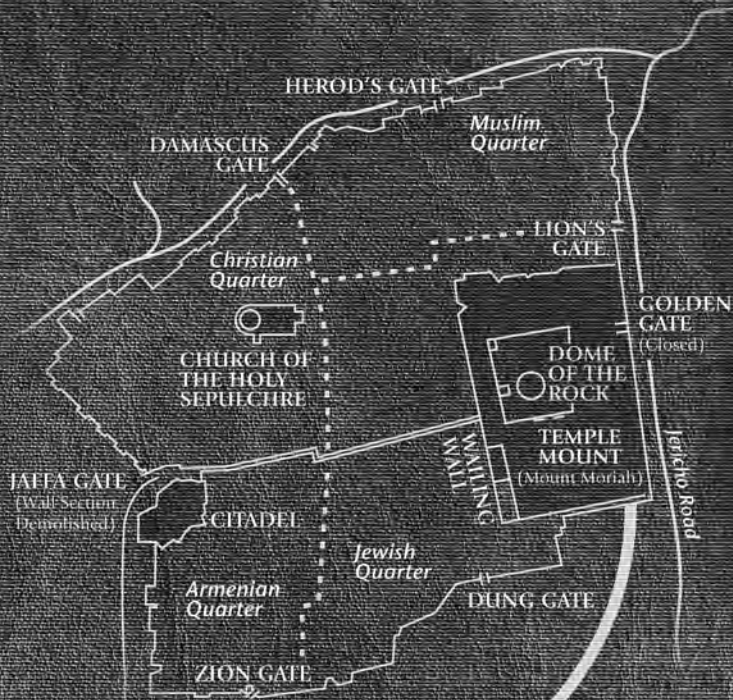
JERUSALEM

EGYPT

SAUDI ARABIA



JERUSALEM OLD CITY



PROLOGUE

With dusk falling on a windless and cloudless autumn day in West Virginia, a veiled man in a black sweater and black pants stepped into the hunting cabin owned by Four-Star General Anthony William Underwood.

Underwood was big, with no sloppiness in his body, even at age fifty-nine. He wore a flannel shirt and was unshaven. There was no electricity in the cabin, and a hissing lantern hung from the ceiling, throwing out light that seemed to grow brighter as night approached, casting shadows on the square face beneath Underwood's equally square crew cut.

He sat at a small dining room table, with a Colt .45 beside an open Bible in front of him. Sometimes a person needed more than God's Word. Underwood had expected the visitor but not the black veil that revealed only the man's eyes. He picked up the Colt and leveled it at the veiled man's chest. "I'm waiting," he said. His idea. Password protection was as old as mankind. Underwood liked things that didn't lose effectiveness in the face of computer technology. The Colt was another good example.

"Armageddon," the visitor complied.

This was the man then. Spooky, all in black like this—someone ensuring he would be invisible when he left the cabin. Even his shoulder bag was black.

Underwood set the pistol back on the table beside the Bible—within easy reach—and made no apology for the implication of its continued presence.

Underwood had been there in the hills at his lakeside cabin for two days. Alone. Hunting during daylight. His staff knew the retreat had been planned. There was nothing unusual about his stay at the cabin.

That made it the perfect site for this meeting. His staff did not know about the visitor, who, as required by the conditions the general had set for this meeting, had parked five miles away and walked the rest of the way, using a GPS locator to find the cabin.

"I don't like the veil," Underwood said. "Looks like what a Muslim woman wears."

"*Niqab*," the visitor said.

When Underwood frowned with obvious incomprehension, the visitor repeated the word. "Niqab. It's what Muslims call a face veil."

"Call it what you want. I don't like it. Muslims are the reason I agreed to this meeting. That veil is a mockery."

"Think of it as irony. Using something so fundamentally Muslim against them . . . if you'll pardon the pun."

"A hood is more American," Underwood said. *American*. Unlike his visitor's accent. British?

"Easier to breathe beneath a niqab," the visitor said.

Yes. Underwood decided the accent was English. Not Cockney, but what was it called? It came to him. Posh.

"More efficient for vision than eye holes in a hood," the visitor continued.

"Don't wear a nabasco then," Underwood said, deliberately mangling the word. "Or a hood."

"I'm afraid it's quite necessary. If you don't know me, we're both protected."

"Could be you are one of the Muslims. There's lots of them in London, right?" Underwood was fishing for a clue to the man's identity. "What do they call it now? Londonistan?"

"Think of all the effort it took to set this up and who set it up for you," the visitor said with those cultured vowel inflections. "You really believe I'm Muslim?"

Underwood grunted.

"If it makes you feel better," the man said, "call me Smith. A good, clean, American name." As he spoke, the veiled visitor set his shoulder bag on the floor.

"Smith," Underwood said. "Get started. If you know anything about me, you know I don't like wasting time."

"Let me show you a terrorist's greatest weapon," Smith said. He stooped to reach into the bag.

"Hold it right there." Underwood had the pistol in his hand again, now pointed at the face veil. "The agreement was no weapons."

Smith froze with his hand inside the shoulder bag, eyes on the Colt. "An agreement I see you had no trouble breaking."

"My cabin," Underwood said. "My rules to break. Tell me what you've got in there."

"A laptop."

Underwood's cabin had other rules—no computers, no cell phones, and no electronics. Normally the general would have barked out a command to leave it in the bag. But this was a meeting with many exceptions already. Including the absolute secrecy.

Underwood set his pistol on the table again as Smith pulled out the laptop. He hadn't been too worried that Smith would try anything dangerous. He'd just wanted to make a point. He left the pistol near his right hand, happy to continue making the point. "Laptop? You'll notice my Colt is more effective."

"The Internet gives terrorists more reach," Smith said.

"You have to have access to have reach," Underwood said. "If you're depending on a connection here, you've wasted a lot of time and effort to meet with me."

"You're right; without my satellite link, this would have been a waste. But you need to see what we are capable of." Smith turned the laptop slightly to give the general a view of the screen. The browser had already begun to link to a Web site, and images began to fill the screen: pieces of Monet's art.

It looked like a page of a university site. Underwood noted the Web address and memorized it. He was known for this ability, and it intimidated his staff.

Without hesitation, Smith clicked on the painting in the lower right-hand corner. It was titled *The Saint-Lazare Station*. While available online as a digital image, the painting itself was displayed in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Smith spoke as if he were lecturing. Internet. Digital download. Encryption. Anonymous chat rooms. In the third millennium, this was a new battleground. Al-Qaeda had shown how. Web sites devoted to training. Chat rooms where suicide bombers encouraged each other. Servers switched daily. It was a world where warriors could gather without crossing borders.

Yes, a brave new world.

An image of the Monet painting opened, and Smith saved it.

Then he brought up the Web site for the Musée d'Orsay and found another copy of *The Saint-Lazare Station*. Smith saved this image too. Side by side, both copies of *The Saint-Lazare Station* were now on his screen, intricate blurs of pale color in Monet's style.

Smith's eyes shifted from the laptop to Underwood. It was eerie for Underwood, seeing only eyes and the pale outline of flesh against the black veil and sweater.

"I'm going to use an encryption program that will analyze the files and compare the differences of both images' binary code," Smith said.

"Binary code." Underwood thought of his boyhood on a Wisconsin farm, when the telephone had been rotary dial, connected by a party line. Then it was typewriters, carbon copies, and slide rules. Now? Satellites provided GPS locations for things as trivial as giving golfers the exact distance to the middle of the green.

"Every pixel in the image is represented by three colors—red, green, or blue. Each color has a binary value—a string of numbers composed of zeros or ones—for computer recognition. I explain this because I want you to know how difficult it has become to stop terrorists."

The explanation continued in that sophisticated accent, as if Smith were an Oxford professor. A pure red pixel, he said, was 1111 0000 0000, which computer

software translated into 100 percent red, 0 percent green, and 0 percent blue. By altering the binary code slightly and adding one bit—one binary digit—of information to the blue segment, the binary code became 1111 0000 0001, a color change imperceptible to the human eye.

Although it was only the addition of a single bit, given the millions of bits in a digital image, there was enough room to hide a message that counterterrorist programs would never discover. Intercepting an embedded message would take knowledge of the suspected sender or recipient and access to the suspected computers and e-mail accounts.

“This is why terrorists have no fear of being caught,” Smith said. “Nor should you when you use this method to communicate with me.”

“Assuming you come up with a good enough reason,” Underwood said. He decided if there *was* a good reason, he’d still insist on seeing the man’s face. In this light, the man’s eyes were brown. Colored contact lenses?

“Keep watching,” Smith said. The black veil appeared seamless with his shoulders.

The cryptology program analyzed the differences and assembled the hidden bits into words.

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Opimgt terb lkajerlkj
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kljltkjepoit l;ol tp29 m,/. ,ad/.
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“Not much of a message for all the work it took to get it,” Underwood said.

“Wait.” Without closing this program, Smith opened another, then copied and pasted the gibberish. His hands were the only exposed skin. Not the hands of a young man. No visible scars. No wedding band, but a groove worn into that finger. The general was trying to absorb as much about the man as possible.

The computer disk continued to whirl. Moments later, both men were looking at an e-mail account and password generated from encryption.

Back in his browser, Smith entered this new information with deft movements of his thick fingers and was given immediate access to the new e-mail server. In the account, he clicked on an e-mail draft marked “Underwood.”

“Extra security,” Smith said. “This e-mail is saved on the server in draft form. Since it is never sent and we’re reading it directly from the server, there is no possibility it would ever be intercepted by any counterterrorist program. It’s a terrorist technique that’s totally secure and totally anonymous.”

Attached to the e-mail draft was a read-only spreadsheet file and some satellite photographs. Smith opened both.

The general leaned forward and began reading with the same intensity he brought to weekly staff meetings.

The message began with this: *Tony, for the sake of America, strongly consider what this man has to tell you.*

After a minute, the general stopped and stared into the eyes of the veiled man. "These documents are from yesterday's White House meeting between the president and the secretary of defense. Those satellite photos are highly classified. Nobody else was at that meeting."

"Exactly," Smith said. "You know then that one of the two of them sent it to me and has suggested you join. You'll understand why I don't reveal which one."

"Join what? Some kind of conspiracy?"

"Consider it a conspiracy of one," came the voice from below the veil. "There's only one link here: me. Just like I'm the only link to one of those two in the White House. To an equivalent person of power in the Israeli government. To some in the Mossad. Another in MI5. A Supreme Court justice. And so on. Not a wide web across the world. But men in positions of great influence to discreetly change what needs to be changed."

"And you want to recruit me, too."

"You've just seen how you and I can communicate, using the terrorists' own techniques against them. Anytime, from anywhere in the world. With utterly no chance of our communications leaking. Let me emphasize: You are not linked to the others. Nor them to you. It's just you and me. Total safety."

Underwood took a few moments to think about it.

The veiled visitor misinterpreted his silence. "You've been in the military for forty years," Smith said. "You are very familiar with how difficult it is to infiltrate and break an enemy composed of cell groups. Now imagine being on the other side. Protected by the same cell structure that you and every other military man find impossible to defeat."

"I'm a general," Underwood said. "I don't have an imagination."

"Of course. In an ideal world, you don't need imagination when you have unstoppable military machinery. But you can't unleash the dogs of war against this enemy. The irony of it must be extremely frustrating. Your weapons are mightier than the ones used by any other general in history, yet you live in a country and age when public opinion is more powerful than your machines."

Underwood grunted, a mixture of agreement and disgust.

"Maybe then imagination should be in your arsenal," the veiled man continued. "I'm here to supply it."

"You're here only because the man who set up this meeting is a man I trust with my life." Underwood was not using the phrase as a metaphorical cliché. Men in the military knew the value of life and trust.

"Precisely," the veiled visitor said. "You have his word that I can be trusted, and I have his word that you can be trusted."

"Wonderful," Underwood said. He felt edgy and knew his sarcasm was a result of it. "Now we know we can buy and sell used cars to each other."

"Sure. If that's what we really wanted." Smith paused. "God will bless those who bless Israel but curse those who curse Israel."

Underwood studied the man's eyes.

"I understand your deep faith," the man said. "That's one of the reasons you have been approached. Also because I know what you want when it comes to the military. A way to unleash the dogs of war. What is the borrowed phrase you are publicly so fond of? 'Drain the swamp.'"

"Donald Rumsfeld called it correctly." Thinking of the time he'd recently spent in Iraq, Underwood couldn't escape an emotional reaction at the futility he'd experienced there. The way he'd been handcuffed in a war against terrorists. "You don't fight the mosquitoes. You drain the swamp."

"For the record," Smith said, "and because it is relevant to this conversation, Rumsfeld borrowed the phrase from an Israeli general, Yehoshafat Harkabi. This is relevant because you and I believe God's mandate that the land must not be divided."

Man against man, Underwood's soldiers could destroy the enemy as easily as squashing a mosquito. But in his camp in Iraq, Underwood had been like a man sitting on his front porch, staring at a swamp through a swarm of mosquitoes around his head. Like a man who owned a bulldozer that could clear the swamp in hours but was shackled by legislation and environmental do-gooders who insisted on protecting the swamp, even though mosquitoes invaded his house every day.

"Gutless liberals," Underwood said. "All through history, war meant war. Romans knew how to do it. Carrot and stick. Offer the king a chance to join the empire. Destroy and loot if the king refused." He snorted. "Embedded media. Think Julius Caesar had to deal with this? *Embedded*—that's a word you use for bloodsucking ticks."

"Terrorists are experts at using the media. You have jets, guided missiles, tanks, the best-trained soldiers in history. . . . Terrorists have homemade bombs and the media. Who is winning?"

Underwood said nothing.

"Let me suggest again to use terrorist weapons against them. The Internet. Cell-group structure. The media."

"What are you trying to sell me?"

"God will bless those who bless Israel but curse those who curse Israel. The men helping me want what you and I want—to drain the swamp. With help from you."

"What exactly do you want from me?" Underwood said.

"Your next tour is Afghanistan."

Although this was still classified information, Underwood wasn't surprised his visitor knew.

"I need intel in Afghanistan," Smith said. "Some units there are ready to do the dirty work that you can't. They don't have to worry about embedded media."

"Units of mercenaries?" Underwood asked.

"Crusaders. Men who are doing it because they believe in it."

"That's ambiguous."

"Like this niqab, ambiguity protects you. But first let me tell you what the fighters there need."

"Go ahead."

"Not only intel. They need for you to look the other way during your tour. Give them a chance to clean up before you send in legitimate U.S. military a day or two after every engagement."

"That won't drain the swamp," Underwood said.

"It would be a beginning."

"I'd need to know more about the end if you want me in at the beginning."

"Eventually, you will be in a position to drain the swamp. To lead and win the greatest battle in history." A significant pause. Direct eye contact. "As a five-star."

"Sure." Underwood snorted. He was a religious man, and he knew of only one battle like that. The password that the man had chosen to identify himself. "Armageddon."

"What else would you call open war between two of the most important civilizations on the globe until every Muslim country is forced to submit or be destroyed?"

"You're serious."

"You mentioned Londonistan," the veiled man said. "And you're right. Europe is already in trouble. Within fifty years, radical Islam is going to dominate the world. It needs to be stopped now, especially Iran. The West has the technology and military might to do it. But it lacks the willpower. With your help, within a year that will all change."

"How will it change?"

"Not knowing is your protection. You have seen enough tonight to know there are others like you, dedicated to saving Western civilization, all with enough power and connections to make it happen."

Another pause from beneath the veil. "You're a devout evangelical. You believe Armageddon is almost upon the world. Perhaps this is God's destiny for you."

"If I say yes?" Underwood leaned back, his hands behind his head.

"I ask you to send something. By Internet. Something that proves you are willing to be part of this. I'll ask for more as required."

Underwood gave it more thought. Entering the service, he'd sworn not to betray his country. While his beliefs put God ahead of his country, was this a time and place to put God ahead of that oath? Had he been asked to worship a beast? ordered to do something morally wrong that would justify turning his back on the military he'd served his entire life?

Underwood made his decision. "No. Flawed as our system is, and much as I hate liberals, it's democracy that makes America great. I won't support any form of anarchy against it."

"No? Remember your faith. God blesses those who bless Israel. The swamp must be drained."

"No." Underwood was military, not covert ops. "God doesn't fight His battles like a terrorist. He doesn't need to."

The veiled man snapped the laptop shut. "I won't embarrass you by trying to convince you otherwise. You are a strong-willed man." He stood and moved away from the dining table, leaving the laptop in place.

"You are a man of honor. Too few men are willing to take a stand and speak their minds." He pulled off his veil and gave Underwood a genuine smile. "I owe you this at least."

"I know you," Underwood said, staring into the face above him. He was too surprised to consider the significance of the removed veil. "I met you once. Arafat was there too."

"You impressed me then," the visitor said. His English accent had disappeared. "You impress me now." Smith extended his hand.

Underwood stood, leaving the gun at the table. He accepted the handshake, then winced at the man's firm grip and a stab of pain. Underwood pulled his hand away and stared at it. Blood dribbled from a small puncture wound.

He looked back at his visitor.

"Old spy trick, General," Smith said. He opened his hand, revealing his palm and the ring with a small spike, gleaming with a trace of blood that looked black in the light of the lantern. "Take my advice. Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

Underwood felt numbness going up his right arm. "What—?"

"You've had a couple of close military friends die of heart attacks in the last month, haven't you?" The visitor smiled grimly. "It wasn't coincidence."

"You're telling me that you met with them, too?"

"I'm sorry, General. We can't take the chance that you'll tell someone about the offer you refused. The paralysis acts quickly. Don't fight it. In about thirty seconds, your diaphragm will begin to freeze. Suffocation will not be pleasant, but you will have enough time to pray and put your soul in order."

His visitor guided him to the couch at the side of the cabin. Barely able to walk, Underwood was powerless to shake off the visitor's help.

"I . . . trusted . . ."

"The stakes are too high. The friend you trusted with your life knows that. He thought that you could be recruited but was prepared to risk that he was wrong. He believes, as I do, that sacrifices have to be made now if the war is to be won later."

Smith settled Underwood against the back of the couch.

"An . . . autopsy . . ." It was a struggle to speak. Underwood felt as though a giant hand had gripped his chest.

"Will point to murder? I'm afraid not. You have no idea of the power and reach involved here."

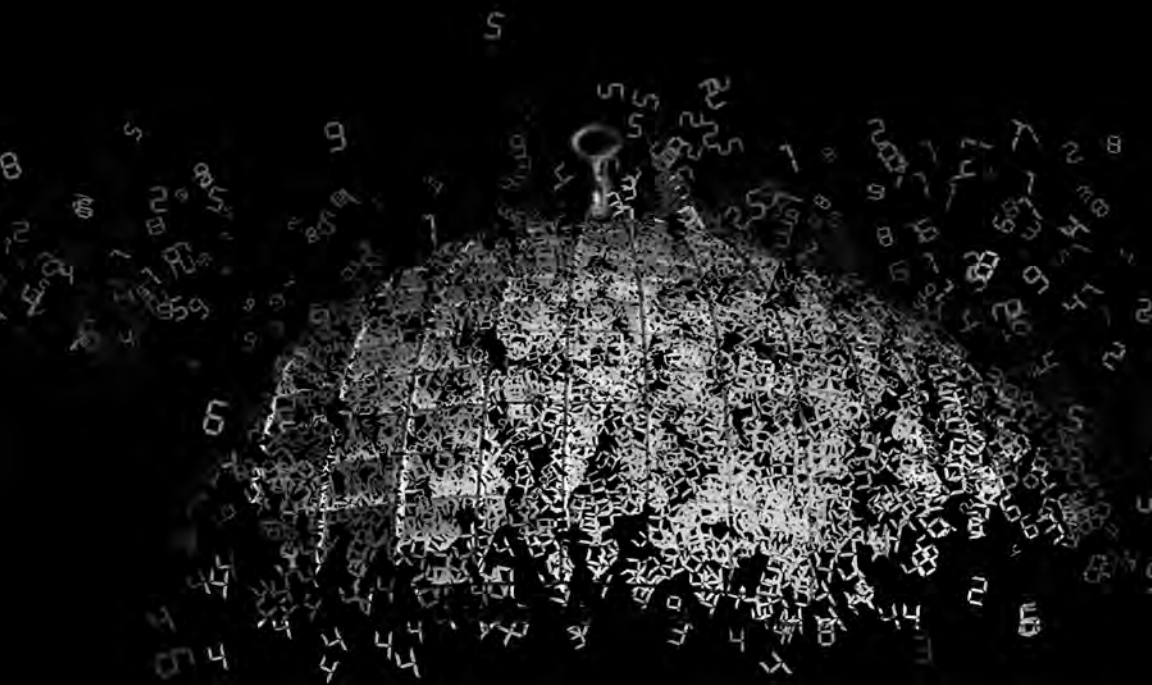
"This . . . is . . . unbelievable." Underwood's eyelids fluttered.

"Our crusaders will get help one way or another." The visitor shook his head, as if chastising a child. "It could have been you. Blessed, not cursed."



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66 DAYS BEFORE COUNTDOWN





DAWSON COUNTY, GEORGIA • 14:32 GREENWICH MEAN TIME

The resurrection of Private First Class Joe Patterson took place twelve months after he had been secretly recruited into the Freedom Crusaders. It was a resurrection six nights after his death, three hours after the sun had cleared the top of the single pine tree visible from the kitchen of the double-wide that had been his home in Dawson County, Georgia, before he'd shipped out to Afghanistan.

Six days before this resurrection, his wife, Sarah, had joined the ranks of military widowhood by stepping away from an episode of *Oprah* inside the living room of the trailer to open the screen door to bright sunshine and two men in U.S. Army uniforms, each with hands clasped in front, one of them with chaplain insignia pinned to his collar.

Wives of men in uniform visualize this moment again and again during the months of service, but no amount of dread and rehearsing is preparation for the actual impact. Sarah had collapsed sobbing before the first man delivered his news with measured sympathy; she could not remember a single word the chaplain had offered as a flimsy comfort to the grief that tore her apart—tore her with the same force Joe had endured in the final milliseconds of his life after his convoy truck triggered a C-4 land mine somewhere north of Kabul.

Now, some six days and sixteen hours later, only prescribed pharmaceutical help allowed her any sleep, which was why she'd been standing at the kitchen sink in a daze when the phone rang. She had no recollection of how long she'd been staring out the window at the blue sky with a full glass of water in one hand and a pill in the other, desperate to catch some sleep, even if it was morning, worrying about whether the doctor had been right when he'd promised the pill wouldn't harm the baby swelling her womb.

When the phone rang, tears had been running down her face as she thought about what it would have been like to tell Joe that she'd felt the first kicks of the

baby. When the phone rang, she didn't fear that a call at this hour was to deliver bad news. Not anymore.

Still, she set the glass down and headed toward the phone with uncertainty. Not uncertainty caused by the hour of the call, but the uncertainty that had tinged every step and action she'd taken since learning of Joe's death six days before, as if gravity had ceased to exist while those two men in uniform stood on her doorstep to tell her about Joe, and she kept expecting gravity to disappear again without any warning.

It took three rings for her to cross the tiny kitchen and fumble for the phone. The digital numbers glowing from the microwave read 9:32. Since Joe had been shipped, it had been her habit to convert time here in Georgia to time there because it made her feel closer to Joe, which put the time at 6:02 p.m. in Afghanistan.

She lifted the phone.

"Hello." Her voice was as dull as her hair. She'd been wearing the same pajamas for days and hadn't looked in a mirror for even longer.

The hiss she heard was the uncertain connection from a satellite phone nine and a half time zones removed from the double-wide. From Khodaydad Kalay, Afghanistan—something that she would learn almost immediately into the phone call.

"Hello," she repeated, hearing a faint bounce back of her voice.

Then they came. The words that marked the resurrection of Private First Class Joe Patterson.

"Babe. It's me. I've got one minute. Swear on your mama's grave that you won't tell anyone about this call."

HOOVER DAM, NEVADA • 14:32 GMT

Of anything—blood, smell, bloating, dismemberment—Kate Penner hated flies the most. Thing was, all the other stuff didn't actually touch you. Sure, at times the sight or smell of a dead body seemed to cling, but it never actually transferred. Flies, on the other hand, could move from the dead and land on the living. Kate hated flies.

Her flashlight beam hit the dead man hanging upside down in the back of a cube van, the sudden light knocking loose a dozen flies from a thick coating of dried blood on the man's face.

Kate grimaced.

Kate's face was wider at the cheekbones than conventional beauty allowed. Her nose had been broken when another cop with bad aim swung a nightstick at a drunk she was wrestling, and it hadn't quite healed straight, which gave her a

certain allure that was more trouble than it was worth. She had great hair, reddish brown with gentle waves down to her shoulders, and knew how great it was, but because of this knowledge, she ignored the hair except to tie it in a ponytail. It was the same philosophy that caused her to use makeup sparingly—bad enough being a woman on the force; she didn't need extra trouble. Especially since the last time she'd taken pains to look good, it had resulted in attracting a man she thought worth marrying. And she had, though it didn't work from day one and ended the day she came home to find him with a yoga instructor learning . . . well, it wasn't the kind of yoga taught in classroom situations.

Her green eyes fooled people into believing she was nicer than she was, and Kate liked this. She liked setting them straight. When she grimaced, as she was doing at the flies, it was more than a good hint that maybe she wasn't simply an accessory for a social evening.

"We're close enough," she told her partner, Frank Vetter, flicking the beam down at the pavement. She couldn't see anything to avoid stepping on, but you never knew. Not these days, when CSI could use a strand of hair to put someone on death row. The last thing Kate and Frank wanted—or needed—was grief about disturbing the crime scene. And it was undoubtedly that.

A crime. And a scene. Kate checked her watch. Six thirty-three.

She flicked her flashlight back to the dead man. What Kate could see of the man's face showed Middle Eastern descent. But there was so much blood it was hard to be sure. How could any body have ever held so much? It began somewhere in the middle of the man's shirt, soaking it so completely that the patterns of the fabric were no longer patterns. The blood covered the man's chest and neck and had pooled beneath his head, which hung only inches off the deck of the van. All the blood was dry, but that didn't tell Kate much. This was the desert. Anything liquid dried in a hurry.

Frank stood beside Kate. He held a flashlight too, but with sunrise twenty minutes away, he didn't need it anymore unless he wanted to add another beam to the darkness inside the van. He'd been a cop as long as Kate—just over ten years each. He, however, was a Dunkin' Donuts cop, happy putting in his time. Kate didn't mind—fewer leadership issues that way. Some of her former partners had struggled with the concept of independent-minded women.

"We'll need the crime scene unit," Kate said. She was an excellent detective with dogged ability that could have put her at the head of the homicide unit. But she didn't like the price that would come with a position like that—paying as much attention to department politics as to good investigating. She'd get the promotion she deserved only when the current chief forgot about how she'd mashed his head into the bottom of a punch bowl for slapping her backside at the last Christmas party. Which, of course, meant never. He'd been drunk enough to forget about

political correctness and make the grab but sober enough to recall the humiliation of the cherry jammed in his left nostril when he came up for air, spouting like a whale. She should have filed a grievance for where he'd put his hand, but that would have meant politics too.

"Yeah," Frank said. "Let's get CSI. Maybe they can solve it in an hour."

Bad joke. Long-standing joke. Anywhere in the department. The Boulder City department, close as it was to Vegas, suffered too because of the hit television series. At least once a week, tourists dropped in, thinking maybe Boulder City was actually part of Vegas, as if they were checking out a rotation of all the stations hoping to catch a glimpse of a star anywhere. *How stupid can people be?* Kate always wondered when they came by.

She paused. *How stupid could people be?*

She had one answer right in front of her, Kate thought. Stupid enough to find a way to end up dead, upside down in a cube van.

KHARH YUNIS, GAZA STRIP • 14:32 GMT

"You are not Abu," Mulvaney Quinn said to the Palestinian opposite him at a table.

The hostage exchange took place in a small room as bare and rough as its table—an almost unbearably hot room with a dirt floor and filled with the smell of garlic, like any of thousands of similar rooms in the squalor of the Gaza Strip.

"I am Zayat," the man said. "Abu takes no risks. He sends me instead. This is my proof."

The Palestinian dropped a small wristwatch on the table. The man's dress suggested he'd taken public appearance lessons from the late Yasser Arafat.

Quinn turned the watch over and looked for engraving on the back. *To Crystal. Love, Daddy.* The rest of the luxury watch matched the description that had been given by the father: pink leather wristband, extra hole punched in the band because it had been too large for Crystal's tiny wrist. She was only four, probably couldn't tell time, and had been given a watch that was worth double what the average Palestinian family earned in a year. Bad luck for her to be an American child in the Middle East, unaware of how much wealth she had on her wrist, how dangerous it was to display that wealth in a public place, and how much Americans were hated, even innocent children.

"Roz," Quinn said into his telephone headset, "I've confirmed the watch."

Roz. Out of the entire staff at Corporate Counterterrorism International, only Quinn called Rossett by that name. Here it was a code word, letting Rossett know that on Quinn's end there were no complications. Yet.

Crystal had been kidnapped, along with her mother, from a Jerusalem side

street. Quinn was optimistic that they were still alive; it was very unlikely that the woman and the child had been taken into Gaza, where the kidnappers had demanded this meeting. Security checkpoints were too risky for them to attempt to take the victims outside of Israel. This was simply a safer place for the kidnappers to negotiate, a haven in a territory of lawlessness.

"You know it belongs to the child," Zayat said. "Now I tell you about the change. You wire the money to a different account number."

"The agreement was clear," Quinn said. "No money until the woman and child are delivered safe."

This wasn't the place or situation for a business suit. Quinn wore khakis and a white mock turtleneck with short, loose sleeves. Comfort over formality. He was in his late thirties, lean and tanned, a tall man with a face that had forgotten how to smile.

Quinn's laptop, running on battery power, sat on the table between them. Quinn wore a headset attached to a port on the laptop, which used voice-over-Internet protocol to serve as his phone. The line was open to keep him in contact with the office in Tel Aviv. Every word was being monitored and recorded at CCTI. During telephone bargaining with Abu over the previous few days, Rossett had explained repeatedly that this constant contact was nonnegotiable.

"I give you the new bank account." Zayat pushed a piece of paper across the table. "Abu is a cautious man. He does not trust what you have set up." He pointed at the laptop. "You change it now while we wait."

Quinn did as directed but didn't like Zayat's obvious tension and impatience. Things went wrong when emotions got in the way.

Before Quinn could say anything, however, Rossett's steady voice came through the headset. "The woman and child are safe."

"Understood," Quinn said. Adrenaline and stress had been sustaining him through horrible jet lag, and he felt the muscles in his shoulder relax as he let out a deep breath of relief. "Roz, I'll release the money."

Quinn spoke to Zayat in Arabic that was flawless except for the Israeli accent. "I've just received the first confirmation. The mother and child are safe at the King David."

Roz was in Tel Aviv, but they'd chosen a Jerusalem hotel for the drop. There would be hugs, screams of joy, and collapsing in relief as the family was reunited in the lobby, but Quinn would permit himself the satisfaction of savoring the triumph later. He tapped at the keyboard on the laptop. "As agreed, one million dollars in U.S. currency are now being transferred to the account number that you provided us. When you've confirmed that your men are back on this side of the border, you allow me to leave."

To make this work, someone needed to provide a guarantee that Abu's men

would not be detained. This was Quinn's other role today. If Abu's men were betrayed, Quinn would be held until they were returned, killed if they were killed.

In theory, the Gaza Strip was no longer a concentration camp. But under the Palestinian National Authority and the new Hamas government, this was still theory. The fact that kidnapping Americans could be a profession to fund terrorist cell groups attested to that. Abu's men would be very safe inside Gaza. Unlike Quinn.

The door opened, briefly flooding the room with sunlight, showing the air heavy with floating dust. Quinn glanced over.

The new arrival was a younger man dressed in a manner similar to Zayat's, but his face was swathed in black cloth. He moved to stand behind Zayat. In one hand he carried a knapsack, which he set on the floor. The other hand held a machine gun, which he lifted and pointed in Quinn's direction.

Quinn stared at the man with the machine gun, then made a point of deliberately turning his head to Zayat without showing any alarm. This was business. When terrorists kidnapped rich Americans, it wasn't about ideology, only money to finance the ideology. Everyone understood that killing negotiators hurt future business. In theory.

"I believe this is personal for you, isn't it?" the new arrival said to Quinn in Arab-accented English. "Your partner handled the negotiating, but you are the one here in person. You even cut short a vacation to return here from America for this. Las Vegas, I understand—a den of sinners in a country of sin."

Quinn refused to show surprise at the man's knowledge. He had seen these situations played out at both extremes. Complete silence until the next confirmation phone call to let both sides know the Palestinians were safe and Quinn could be released. Or endless chatter that was a sure indication of nerves on the other side.

Teflon, Quinn always told himself. *Be Teflon. Nothing sticks. Answer in polite, neutral tones with polite, neutral words.* "I represent Lloyd's of London and the American businessman insured by Lloyd's. I'm a middleman. Which means it is my job to make the transaction successful for both parties."

"Yet if I understand correctly," the Palestinian said, "you lost your wife and daughter to a Palestinian suicide bomber. What, five years ago? The woman and girl matched in age then to the woman and child you just ransomed for one million; isn't that right?"

Now Quinn was alarmed. This was information the terrorist should not have. CCTI firewalled personal information of employees with the zealotry of guards at Fort Knox.

"I represent Lloyd's of London and the American businessman insured by

Lloyd's," Quinn repeated. He was a good poker player, and this was high-stakes Texas hold 'em, where the losers ended up dead. "I am a middleman. This is business. Nothing more."

"One might guess you are still trying to rescue the family you lost," the masked Palestinian said with an obvious sneer in his voice. "A futility, is it not?"

Images flooded Quinn's mind, the images he fell asleep to every night, triggering here and now the same emotions that didn't seem to lose the edge or rawness over time.

Teflon, he told himself. *Teflon*.

"Put a hand on the table, palm up," the masked Palestinian said, still standing behind Zayat.

Quinn raised an eyebrow.

The man raised the machine gun and pointed the barrel at Quinn's head. Quinn leaned forward and rested his left forearm on the table, turning his palm toward the ceiling.

"Now is your time," the Palestinian said.

Zayat leaned forward too and clamped his fingers over Quinn's wrist, holding Quinn's hand in place. He reached under his leg, pulling out a long knife he'd kept hidden. With savage swiftness, he drove the point of the blade down into the center of Quinn's palm, pinning Quinn to the table with a thud.