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Paid in Blood

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>> MEDITERRANEAN SEA, OFF THE COAST OF GREECE
>> NINETEEN DAYS AGO

Intensely alert, the radar operator sat hunched over his equipment in the small cabin of the research ship *Observer*. “The target is holding steady.”

“You are certain this is the ship?” Qadir Yaseen stood behind the young man. Yaseen was in his fifties, lean and hard-bodied because he had spent most of his life fighting a jihad against the aggressors of his people. He wore a traditional mogasab over a thobe. The robe’s gold trim stood out against the dark cotton. His black smagh framed his face.

“Yes, sir. I have verified the satellite signal you gave me.”

“Very well,” Yaseen said. “Let us go and get my cargo.”

He alerted the ship’s crew over the PA system, then strode out of the bridge. Two bodyguards armed with machine pistols

went through the hatch first, flaring to either side to take up escort positions.

As Yaseen stepped out onto the deck, the ship came alive around him. Anticipation filled him. Finally, after nearly three years of preparation, bribing, blackmailing, falsifying identities, and careful murder, his plan was coming together.

Yaseen had been born in 1948, a man without a proper country because the Great Satans had given Palestine to the godless Israelis. Since that day, he had fought and shed his lifeblood and the fortunes of his father, pursuing the war to push the Jews from Palestine. But the Americans had constantly shored them up with money and weapons. He had begun his holy war against the Israelis when he was nineteen, serving against the hated Jews in the Six-Day War.

Until 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed with Israel, Yaseen had faithfully followed Yasser Arafat. Once the agreements had taken place, Yaseen had gone his own way and remained apart. Over the intervening years, he had raised an army to fight against the Israeli occupation of his homeland. For most of his life he had struggled to further Muslim interests in the Middle East. For too long his people had possessed little means to strike back at Israel and the Western world.

Tonight, however, that balance of power would begin to change. He was going to strike back in such a way that others who hated the Americans would attack as well. The Americans, under their warmongering president, had engendered a great feeling of enmity around the world. Everyone would blame them for the chaos that followed.

Yaseen strained his eyes against the dark night that lay heavy on the sea. He could see nothing yet, but he was not dismayed. The ship was out there. So was the deadly cargo it carried.

Observer's engines throbbed to life. The ship shouldered its way through the sea at half speed.

The thirty warriors Yaseen had brought with him by helicop-

ter at sunset took their places across *Observer's* deck. All of them were young believers in the mission that Yaseen had set for himself. They carried AK-47 rifles and Tokarev pistols. The Russian assault rifles and handguns had been easy to acquire in Odessa, Ukraine. The city was a major Black Sea port and had a large amount of illegal contraband flowing through it. Inhabitants there still referred to the city as Odessa Mama, which had begun life as an underworld trading post.

A pale yellow oval burned a hole in the night. It rose and fell below the dark horizon of the sea.

Yaseen's heart raced. He had spent millions on the weapons he was about to acquire but had not yet seen. Anticipation filled him and made him take a deep breath.

Within minutes, *Observer* overtook the cargo ship. Yaseen could see sailors shifting into defensive positions on deck.

"Sir," the leader of Yaseen's warriors called.

Yaseen nodded.

The leader gestured. Immediately one of the warriors stood and pulled his rifle to his shoulder. The blunted detonation of a round echoed across the deck. In the next instant, a grappling hook arced across the water between the two ships. Loops of rope followed, singing as they spilled from the reservoir beneath the rifle. The hook bounced on the cargo ship's deck for a moment, then caught on the railing.

Instantly sparks exploded into the night as bullets whined from metal surfaces. The cargo ship's crew had opened fire, targeting *Observer's* prow and deck. The chain around the deck jerked and rattled as bullets struck it.

Yaseen's warriors returned fire, proving their greater skill and precision as their bullets drove back the cargo ship's crew. Yaseen drew his own pistol and fired as well. There was no mercy in him when it came to his enemies. He'd killed his first man, an Israeli soldier, when he was twelve.

"Lights," the commando leader called.

Harsh white illumination strafed the cargo ship's deck. Dead bodies rolled on the heaving surface as the ship fought the water. A few wounded tried to crawl away. One man got too near the deck's edge and tumbled overboard. The black water immediately swallowed him.

One after another, Yaseen's warriors clipped D rings to the cable and slid across the intervening distance. Once aboard the cargo ship, the warriors moved across the upper deck and quickly executed all crewmen they found. Their orders allowed no survivors. Bright muzzle flashes flickered to life, then died.

Clipping his own D ring to the cable, Yaseen followed his men onto the besieged ship. Just putting his feet on the wooden deck empowered him.

Several warriors produced flashlights and stood waiting at the top of the stairs. They went down into the hold at Yaseen's command. Yaseen followed.

The hold stank of fish. A few inches of water sloshed across the floor. Yaseen led the way farther back into the hold. He stopped beside an eight-foot-tall bin packed with ice and fish. "Here."

The arrangement had been simple. Yaseen had paid his money, and his merchandise was to have been hidden within the ship's load. The crew had had no idea what was hidden beneath their feet as they went about their duties on deck. Only the ship's captain was aware of the deadly cargo. Two of Yaseen's men were searching the ship for the captain now. In moments Yaseen would finally take possession of his prize: two nuclear missiles.

At Yaseen's order, two of the warriors laid down their rifles and took shovels from the tool cabinet on the hull. They clambered into the bin and started shoveling ice and fish into the water sloshing across the lower deck. It took several minutes for Yaseen to realize that nothing was buried in the reeking mixture.

A scramble of feet came down the stairs.

Another two warriors brought a fat man down the stairs and dumped him unceremoniously onto the floor. Water splashed across the man's face, and he blubbered in pain and fear. He spoke in a language Yaseen didn't understand but believed to be Greek.

"Do you speak English?" Yaseen peered at the man.

Hiding behind his arms and hands as if they would somehow deflect the bullets from the weapons pointed at him, the man looked up. "I speak English. Yes. Good English."

"Where is the captain?"

"I am the captain."

"Where is my cargo?" Yaseen asked.

The captain shook his head. "What cargo?" He remained huddled on his knees.

Moving as quickly as a striking snake, a warrior backhanded the captain across the face with a pistol, knocking his head back sharply.

"The missiles," Yaseen said calmly. "Where are my missiles?"

Sweat rolled down the man's face. "I have no missiles. Gronsky gave me nothing." He was weeping now. "He said the deal was off. He said you knew."

A black rage possessed Yaseen. He'd hated dealing with Colonel Vladimir Gronsky of the Russian army. The man was greedy and unscrupulous, but he routinely worked in the black-market circles, and Yaseen had needed him to arrange his munitions purchase.

Unable to control the rage that filled him, Yaseen picked up one of the shovels and beat the man to the ground. He didn't stop hitting the captain until he had no energy left. All the years, all the money he'd spent, and he'd been betrayed by another man's greed. Shuddering, Yaseen threw the shovel aside and glared down at the captain's bloody, lifeless body.

Then he took a deep breath. Gronsky was greedy. The missiles still existed, were still within his grasp, as was his vengeance for his family and friends whom the United States had killed and

would kill for generations to come. He could still make his plan work.

He turned and walked from the cargo hold. On deck, Yaseen gave orders to place demolition charges. Minutes later, the men returned to the *Observer* the same way they had come. The moment the ship had moved a safe distance away, the munitions blew and the cargo ship broke to pieces.

Yaseen watched the ship and crew settle into their watery grave. Gronskey would be made to pay for his betrayal. He would pay most dearly.



1

ME SCENE **NCIS** **CRIME SCENE** NAVAL CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIVE SERVICE

- >> WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA
- >> THE PRESENT
- >> 2053 HOURS

Will Coburn stopped in front of the dead woman lying crumpled on the threadbare carpet. He stared down at her. Violent death still gave him pause even after years of seeing it.

He held his flashlight steady and examined the woman's body. She was in her midtwenties. She'd kept her black hair short and neat, but blood matted it now. More blood streaked her face and made her look of pained surprise even more stark. She wore blue jeans and a dove gray blouse under a nondescript green Windbreaker.

Someone had cut the woman's throat. Crimson streaked the front of her blouse and Windbreaker.

Only a few blood streaks stained the carpet she lay on.

Violence and death no longer shocked Will. Since his transfer

to NCIS, the Naval Criminal Investigative Services, three years ago, he had seen every kind of inhumanity one person could show another. But he never got used to seeing it. It was enough, at times, for him to question God, though he knew that God allowed men free will. When men abused their freedom, it was their own fault, not God's. Still, the peace Will had with the Lord was an uneasy thing, made even more uneasy by what was occurring in his own family life these past months.

Will glanced around the apartment, trailing the flashlight beam with his sea green eyes. There was no electrical power to the room. The building super was supposed to be working on that.

Unfurnished and untended, the apartment held the thick smell of must and old sweat. The late March night left the room cloaked in thick shadows. Whirling blue lights from the police car parked in the street outside washed over the spiderwebs clinging to the top part of the window. The lower part of the window was broken. Glass lay inside on the floor, telling Will that the window had been broken from outside.

"Is she one of yours?" The voice was loud and challenging.

Will turned to face the man who had accompanied him into the grim room.

Wilmington police detective Leonard Carpenter stood nearby. He was shorter than Will's six feet one inch and at least twenty pounds above his ideal weight. His sandy hair held streaks of gray and he wore a neat mustache. His pale blue eyes looked permanently bloodshot. His tan suit held wrinkles.

"She's one of ours," Will answered. He ran a hand through his thick shock of black hair, cut within military regulations. Though the room was cool, his khaki Dockers felt like they were clinging to his legs, and he was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm under his blue NCIS jacket. He shrugged the jacket off, revealing the Springfield Extreme Duty .40-caliber pistol he carried in a holster strung across his broad shoulders.

Carpenter flipped through his notes. “Says here that she’s Chief Petty Officer Helen Swafford. She was NCIS?”

Will nodded.

Carpenter put his notepad away. “Know what she was doing out here?”

“No.”

“If she was working on something, seems like she would have had a partner.”

“The rest of the team is accounted for.” Will had checked that through Swafford’s supervisor.

“Then she was out here on her own hook.”

“Looks that way,” Will agreed.

“Wilmington’s not that far from Camp Lejeune,” the homicide detective said, “but she came a fair piece to get herself killed.”

“I’m sure getting killed wasn’t on her agenda, Detective,” a feminine voice stated.

Will glanced up as Maggie Foley entered the apartment. At five feet four inches tall and slender, Maggie didn’t look like much of a threat. Her dark brown hair was cropped at the shoulder, and she looked younger than her twenty-seven years. But she had an obsession with the gym and no-holds-barred volleyball that made her tough as nails on a martial-art mat.

Maggie looked as if she’d been at a dinner party when the call had come in. She wore black slacks with razor-edge creases and a charcoal, bias-striped shirt. French cuffs added an understated elegant flair. Her diamond earrings glittered as they caught the light. To Will, Maggie’s appearance seemed in stark contrast to her surroundings in this room of death. But then, even in fatigues, Maggie Foley never looked middle class.

The NCIS drafted most of its agents from the civilian sector, including a number of ex-policemen and security guards. Will’s unit was different. Because his team handled potentially lethal special assignments, most of his team members had been handpicked

from the military. Maggie was the sole civilian. None of the personnel the military had to draw from had the expertise she brought to the team. She'd spent eight weeks in boot camp prior to assignment to the unit, then another month working with Special Ops personnel to bring her up to speed. There were things she was still learning about military ops, but she learned them quickly.

"According to the super, this apartment has been vacant for two months." Maggie shined her beam on piles of empty beer cans and cigarette butts in three corners of the room, and the two stained sleeping bags in the center. "Somebody comes calling while the three bears are out."

"Neighborhood kids," Carpenter replied. "They come up here and party when no one's looking."

"Did one of them make the call to the PD?" Maggie asked.

"Don't know. Caller didn't identify himself."

"According to the phone records of the pay phone outside," Maggie said, "a call was placed to the Wilmington Police Department about an hour and a half ago. That was at 7:17 p.m. Took you a while to call us, didn't it?"

"I wanted to verify the murdered woman's identity before I bothered you," Carpenter said.

Will knew that wasn't exactly the truth. Anytime military personnel were involved in a crime—whether that person was the victim or the criminal—the investigation was turned over to the military. The friction between the local authorities and the military investigators was long-standing.

"How did you make the identification?" Maggie persisted.

"Her ID was on the floor."

"Did you disturb the body?"

Anger stained Carpenter's broad face. "I got better things to do than stand here and answer stupid questions." He started to walk away.

"Detective Carpenter." Will's voice carried command. After twelve years spent aboard ships—six of them commanding one,

the aircraft carrier USS *John F. Kennedy*—his voice was a tool, as solid and heavy as a ball-peen hammer. “I can contact your captain. I bet I could free up some time in your schedule.”

Carpenter cursed beneath his breath but the sound carried in the small room. “I got fifteen years in on homicide. I know not to mess with evidence. When I checked that ID, this was still my murder scene.”

“Now,” Maggie said coolly, “it’s ours.”

Will knew Carpenter wanted to say something. Intent stiffened the man’s bulky frame. But he kept silent. A moment later, the homicide detective turned and left the room.

“Well,” Maggie said, “I suppose that could have gone better.”

“It could have,” Will agreed. “It didn’t.” He turned his attention back to the dead woman.

“He cost us nearly two hours.” Maggie pulled on a pair of thin surgical gloves from her purse.

Looking at the dead woman, Will said, “We were already too late.”



>> 2139 HOURS

“She wasn’t killed here.” Maggie moved around the room and shot images with a digital camera from every angle.

“I know,” Will replied. He took notes on an iPAQ Pocket PC.

“There’s not enough blood and no signs of a struggle.” Maggie took another image and moved closer to the body, where small triangular white markers with black numbers on them marked evidence.

“There are bruises on her face and arms,” Maggie went on, “and three of her fingernails are broken. She didn’t go down without a fight.”

Twenty minutes ago, the building super had reconnected the electricity to the room. The bulbs offered a weak yellow incandescence that required an external flash on the camera. But the light relieved the darkness that had filled the room.

“Judging from the blood smears on her clothing, whoever killed her used something to transfer the body.” Maggie squatted and took another shot. “I’m guessing a sheet or a piece of carpet from the blotches I’m seeing. Something fabric, not plastic.”

Will had already guessed that. When he’d first taken the NCIS assignment, processing a crime scene had seemed beyond his capabilities. There were so many things to know. He’d surprised himself by learning them so quickly. He’d surprised his field training officer as well.

“That transfer material is incriminating,” Maggie said. “That’s why he or she took it from the scene.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and find it.” Luck, Will knew, was part of every criminal investigation. Sometimes it worked for an investigator and sometimes it worked against. But luck was made by effort. They had to start beating the bushes.



>> 2218 HOURS

Dr. Nita Tomlinson was thirty-one years old, a tall, lean redhead with freckles and gray-green eyes. She possessed an easy disposition and could generally be counted on to join the beer-and-pizza crowd after hours. She was also the team’s medical officer.

As she stepped from the military Hummer that would carry Chief Petty Officer Helen Swafford’s mortal remains back to the medical lab at Camp Lejeune, Nita pulled a lab coat on over the charcoal slacks and green-and-white-striped knit top she wore that enhanced the curves of her body. Her high-heeled boots seemed designed more for clubbing than fieldwork.

“Interrupt something?” Will asked when he went outside to meet her.

Nita brushed her hair back from her face. “What?”

“Nice clothes,” Will said. “I thought maybe you got called away from a night out with Joe.”

Joe Tomlinson was Nita’s husband of five years. They had a four-year-old daughter named Celia. Will knew that with the backlog of work Nita had verifying even routine deaths and checking files on those killed in action, she seldom got home during the evenings these days.

Nita seemed a little disconcerted. “No. I was . . . out. By myself. Just had a couple drinks with girlfriends to clear my head. I wasn’t ready to go home and put on my mommy cap. Where’s the body?”

“Inside.” Will walked beside her as he guided her toward the building. The police had roped off the area with yellow NCIS crime-scene tape and sawhorses.

“Commander Coburn,” a young Asian woman called from behind the tape. A press ID hung from the lapel of her jacket. She held a microphone out. “Could you give us a comment?”

“I see the press has learned your name,” Nita said.

Will didn’t offer a comment, nor did he break stride. He assumed the media people had resourced his picture and made identification. So far the media still didn’t have the dead chief petty officer’s name.

“Where’s the rest of the crew?” Nita asked as they stepped into the building’s foyer.

“Frank and Shel are knocking on doors in the neighborhood,” Will said. “Estrella is going through the chief petty officer’s office files.”

“The vic wasn’t on assignment?”

“According to her supervisor, nothing she was working would have brought her out to this neighborhood.”

Nita frowned. “So it’s a mystery.”

“So far.”

“I hate mysteries.”

“When we finish the job,” Will said, “there won’t be any mysteries left.” As he turned toward her, he smelled alcohol on her breath. “Are you in shape to do this?”

Nita shot him a reproachful look. “Yes.”

“I smell alcohol.”

“At this time of night, you usually would.” Nita took a breath mint from her purse and pulled on a pair of surgical gloves. “I’m fine. If I wasn’t, I’d call someone else in. I know how to do my job.” Her tone was angry and defensive.

Will had heard that in her voice a lot lately. “All right,” he said. He’d never known a time when Nita couldn’t perform her job. But he was afraid a storm was brewing on the horizon. He’d been a sailor much of his life, and sailors knew storms. Maybe he’d have noticed Nita’s situation earlier if he hadn’t been dealing with his own.