

Chapter Twenty-one

Karim al-Hadji's return to Tehran was not quite as he had envisioned it. To say his superiors were surprised to see him was a massive understatement of the facts. To say they were happy to find him at their door was very far from the truth. Seyed Mahmood had conveniently neglected to inform Tehran of Karim's announced change of plans and had expressed phony outrage and surprise when he heard that Karim had arrived in Tehran, resurrected from the dead, as it were.

Karim sat at a gray painted steel table in the basement of IRG Headquarters, in a sparsely decorated room, the only decoration being a portrait of Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamanei. Though he was shivering from the cold, and somewhat from apprehension, he was seething with rage inside. Across the table from the almost martyr Karim was Colonel Mansour el Mohammed, the chief of the interrogation unit of the IRG. He was a stiff-necked martinet, with a sallow complexion evidencing a lifelong tobacco habit. He took pride in his immense waxed moustache, and habitually twirled the end of the right side.

He glowered at Karim. "You have disobeyed your orders and jeopardized the security of this agency. What possessed you to take such a foolhardy chance? If you had been apprehended, the world would have known it was us and not some nebulous group. This is a disgrace. You are a coward, Karim al-Hadji, who could not fulfill a mission for the Prophet as you were instructed. Now tell me, in great detail, what you did, exactly. Leave nothing out. If there is the slightest possibility that you left a trail, I must know of

it. We cannot craft a plan to divert suspicion from us if you are not scrupulously honest and accurate.” He raised his voice irately. “Do I make myself clear?”

Biting his tongue to keep from retorting angrily, Karim answered, “Yes, Colonel. I will be truthful.”

For the next hour, Karim recounted the plan and its result. Occasionally embellishing some points to make him appear smarter than he had been. He was interrupted frequently by the Colonel, who deftly used the technique of repeating questions to see if he would elicit a different response the second time. Karim stuck close enough to the facts that he was able to escape trouble in that area. Finally, the Colonel asked, “Did you find it difficult to blend in while you were in America?”

“No, it was not difficult at all. Unless you break a law, such as while driving a car, no one bothers you. I could have gone anywhere in the country and no one would have cared. I carried no papers other than a driver’s license. The Americans are stupid when it comes to knowing who is who.”

“There are some here who want you to be executed for your disobedience. I am not so sure that is a good idea. There are certain elements to your story that I find appealing. Your ingenuity, for instance, in transporting the bomb in a baby carriage. Now that was clever, very clever.” He paused while Karim thought that over. Karim sat stoically. He would show this hard-liner no weaknesses. The Colonel said, “Think about it, Karim al-Hadji. Why should we let you live?”

He did think about it. A long minute crept by as he tried to formulate in his mind the perfect answer, the one that might save his life. “I have gained much knowledge about the way Americans are and how they think. This information can be useful to

others who may go to the United States. I can be valuable in the training of these people. Or, if I am fortunate enough to be assigned to another mission, I could be even more effective than before. I believe in our cause. Do not kill me for my momentary lapse in judgment. I really believed that if I returned to Iran I would be of much more use than if I died in America.”

The Colonel showed a hint of a smile. “You do not really believe I am buying this dog shit, do you? In fact, Karim al-Hadji, you are a coward, a coward who has betrayed the trust we placed in you.”

Karim could not contain himself any longer. The lean muscles in his face hardened as he glared at the Colonel. “Colonel, I did not anticipate a parade in my honor upon my return, but I did expect better than this. I know that you fought for Iran in the Iraq war. I know you were promoted after a successful action near the Shatt al-Arab. You fought in battle after battle. It is obvious that you grew in experience into a masterful soldier. It is also obvious you did not strap twenty pounds of explosives to your body and run into the enemy lines, intent upon becoming a martyr. Would I call you a coward for not doing so? Of course not. You were brave without being stupid. Well, so am I. If you want to let some lout chop off my head to prove a point, go ahead. But don’t call me a coward. I fought to live and fight again. If I were you, I would not throw that away.”

Colonel Mansour al Mohammed looked at Karim to see if could detect madness. He had interrogated hundreds of men, and some women, and had never had one react as Karim al-Hadji had. This was an exceedingly clever rascal. His boldness in turning the tables upon his interrogator showed potential for greatness. But he could not acknowledge that. He must retain the upper hand, and he would. But he knew then that he

was not going to have this man executed. He raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. The door to the room opened and a sergeant entered. He bowed ever so slightly. The Colonel said, "Oshnar, please bring us a pot of fresh coffee and two cups. And some date sugar and mare's milk."

He said to Karim, "I have decided to give you another opportunity to prove your worth. This time it will not depend upon your dying, but rather, your living."

Karim tilted his head slightly and nodded. He said, "I hope the coffee is hot. It's damned cold in here."

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