

Chapter Forty-one

Kahlil was surprised that Karim had sent him out for hamburgers from MacDonald's.

He laughed about his leader's choice of fast food over something more exotic. "Hamburgers? Are you such an American now that you eat burgers?"

Karim said, "Blend, Kahlil, blend. Become a plain American citizen. Do nothing that is out of the norm. Blend."

After their meal, Karim took his new protégé to the ferry slip, where they boarded for a trip to Bald Head Island. It was a brisk, sunny day. A sailboat was tacking up the Cape Fear River, just in from the sea. The flag atop the ferry's superstructure was snapping a staccato beat. Karim said, "What a glorious day to be alive. If we do our job as we should, there is an excellent chance we will stay alive for a long time."

As they rode toward the Bald Head ferry terminal, Karim explained some of the peculiarities that were the law on the island.

"No gasoline powered vehicles are allowed, which I thought at first was going to present a problem. But the Americans are an ingenious lot. There is a company in the state of California that manufactures electric all-terrain vehicles called Gorillas. They are much more powerful and fast than the golf carts you will see all over Bald Head. I have ordered six of the Gorillas, and expect delivery in three days. When we attack, we will be highly mobile. Our heroes of September 11th flew in American jets. We will ride on American ATV's." With a laugh, he said, "There is no end to the American's spirit of cooperation."

The entrance to the marina on Bald Head leads directly in from the river, running inland for about fifty yards between rock walls before the narrow channel opens into the marina basin. On today's approach to the entrance the wind was blowing toward the southwest, in the same direction as the river's current. The tide was also going out at the same time. These forces working together made it a difficult feat of seamanship to get the ferry into the entrance to the marina. Karim noticed that the captain crabbed the ship much like an airplane pilot would do when trying to land in a strong crosswind, approaching the entrance almost beam to, and then at the last moment, turning the bow in and gunning the engines as he completed the maneuver successfully.

Kahlil said, "Damn, that was close. I wasn't sure we were going to make it."

Karim asked, "Have you been on boats before?"

"Only the Staten Island Ferry, and it never bobbed around like this one."

Emboldened by the friendly manner that Karim was showing, Kahlil asked, "I was wondering, Boss, if this is your first mission here in the United States?"

Karim looked at him, his face grim and threatening. "That is not for you to know. You are too curious, Kahlil al-Udhma. You would be well advised to keep those questions to yourself."

"I'm sorry, Boss. I won't make that mistake again."

"You damn well better not."

The ferry had just entered the main body of the marina and was making a turn to starboard, heading toward the wooden pilings of the slip.

Karim pointed to '*Cash Float*'. "That's my boat. When we get off this tub, we will walk over there."

As they walked forward on the ferry deck, Karim saluted the captain. He called up to him, “A nice bit of maneuvering on the entrance.”

The captain waved back. “Thanks. I’ve had plenty of practice.”

Karim said to Kahlil as they walked onto the land, “The captain will remember me. He will think only friendly thoughts when I begin bringing Gorillas on his craft.”

They sauntered around the perimeter of the marina basin. Alongside *Cash Float*, Karim climbed over the railing and went to the forward hatch. Kahlil followed, tripping on the railing as he tried to swing himself aboard. Karim shook his head and then gestured for Number Two to follow him below.

In the main cabin, Kahlil marveled at the luxuriousness of the interior. “Boss, this is a beautiful boat. I didn’t know they made them this nice.”

“Yes, it is nice. But that’s not why I brought you here. We have plans to discuss. First, though, I want to know more about you. You haven’t told me much.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why are you doing this? Are you a dilettante, someone who wants to flirt with danger, to be associated with big, bad Muslims? Or is it that you hate America, the place of your birth? And if that is the case, why?”

“I detest what America has become, what it stands for. It is an oligarchy, run by plutocrats who rape the people every day in every way. The only people I see who are standing against the international hegemony of the United States are those in the Islamic nations. So I became a Muslim and joined the cause.”

“And you believe Allah is great?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I didn’t accept that there was a deity before I became a Muslim, and I’m not sure I do now. But I’m open to the possibility. I suppose you might say that I am a political Muslim more than a religious one. But I pray to Allah for enlightenment. I have brought my prayer mat with me. Maybe illumination will come.”

“Well, such candor is appreciated, but you had better be careful who you say those things to. Agnosticism can get you beheaded in some quarters.”

“Thank you for the heads off heads up.”

“You have a sense of humor, too. But also be aware that flippancy is not an Iranian trait. Another caution.”

“Okay, Boss.”

“What does your family think of your new found allegiance?”

“They are not happy about it. We are estranged. I haven’t spoken to any of them in over a year.”

“And how did you meet Seyed Mahmood?”

“I was the political vice-president of The Young Islamic Society at the university. Mahmood came there to speak to our group. He gave me his card and asked me to call upon him after graduation. I did. He offered me a job as an interpreter. I accepted it.”

Karim said, “You are not a seasoned veteran of the struggle. In many respects, you are still a callow youth. Why, then, do you believe Seyed Mahmood has sent you to be the number two man in this operation? I want an honest answer.” He looked sternly at Kahlil al-Udhma. “A very honest answer. And if I don’t get it, your ass will be on the next bus north. You see, I am not a fool. I am fairly certain why you are here.”

Number Two involuntarily gulped before responding. Even in the cool of the cabin, sweat broke out on his face. “The truth is...well, the truth is that my principal duty is to keep an eye on you and report back to Seyed Mahmood all that I see and hear. Is that honest enough for you?”

Karim laughed out loud. “Yes, my assistant. That is quite honest enough. And I didn’t even have to mention torture, did I?”

Crestfallen, Kahlil al-Udhma said, “If you want me to leave, I will. I wouldn’t blame you. But since I have arrived, I have developed an admiration for you, for the way you get things done. I would like to stay, as a loyal soldier in your army.”

“Okay, you can stay. But you must not contact Seyed Mahmood without me listening in. I am the leader of this venture, and no one else. It is my ass on the line, not his. I have no diplomatic immunity to shield me as he does if things go bad.”

“Absolutely understood.”

“I will watch you closely, my Number Two. You have thrown away your loyalty to America, and now you have dumped your allegiance to Seyed Mahmood. Your loyalties are mercurial at best.”

Karim knew the answer to this next question before he asked it. “Have you ever killed anyone?”

“No.”

“How do you know you will be able to do so when the time comes?”

“I just assume that I will. I know it has to be done.”

“We will see about that...when the time comes. And now, sit down. I’ll go over the attack plans in detail with you. I’m not sure as yet what part you will play, but there will be something for you. Rely on that.”

Kahlil felt relief flooding in. “Yes, and thanks. I won’t let you down.”

“If you do, it will be the worst day of your young life.”

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