

Chapter Eight

The Galleria would not have been my first choice for our meeting. It is usually packed with shoppers. I rarely go there without running into someone I know. When I found the bench where I was to wait, it was occupied by a young African-American guy. He was dressed in hip-hop fashion, complete with ball cap turned sideways. He was listening to an iPod, performing a seated dance to the music. His skin was an unusual ochre color, with reddish freckles. He glanced at me with remarkably brilliant blue eyes. As it turned out, our get-together did not take place there. I received a cell phone call just as I arrived at the appointed place. It was Grant.

“Change of plans, Judge. We will meet you at the Holiday Inn in Richardson. Room 208. And don’t use your phone. We are monitoring it.” He hung up abruptly.

Richardson is a suburb north of Dallas. It is home to Texas Instruments, about 100, 000 Republicans and twenty-five or so Democrats. I knew the area well, having attended local G.O.P meetings there several times over the years. As I pulled into the parking lot at the hotel, I saw Joe Waldrip exit his car and watch me park. He nodded but made no move to join me. With a hand motion he directed me to go into the Holiday Inn. I assumed (correctly) that he was checking to see if I was alone and if I was being followed or surveilled.

I took the elevator to the second floor, found 208 and knocked. After a moment, Agent Grant let me in. He had thoughtfully set out a couple of Diet Cokes and a bucket of ice. “Cold drink, Duncan?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Whoops, I thought. He has never before called me by my first name. Is this good?

The door opened and Waldrip entered. He said, "All clear, Don."

Grant said, "As I expected. You're a loner, Duncan. You'd have to be to have lasted in your business as long as you have. That's a good thing."

Waldrip came up behind me and gave me a quick pat down. "No more funny stuff with the Glock. Okay, Judge?" This caused him to endure another small coughing spasm.

"Sure. That thing yesterday was just for grins anyway. Someday when I write a book about this, I'll really enjoy reporting about the time I got the drop on the FBI."

Grant said, "Disabuse yourself of that notion right now. There isn't going to be a book, Judge."

"Okay, fellas. No book. So why don't you tell me what it is I won't be writing about."

Grant leaned back and tented his fingers together. He asked, "What do you know about the war against terror?"

"Well, I listen to what the President's people have to say, that we are on the verge of success, and I also pay attention to the lefties in Congress, who are positive we are going downhill fast. I suppose the truth is somewhere in between. But I don't have an inkling regarding the grand plan, if there is one. I'm not even sure who the real enemy is."

Grant said, "The terrorist movement is literally worldwide. What gives our side some semblance of hope is that the fanatic factions are fragmented, alliteratively speaking. There are as many agendas as there are terrorist leaders. Most of them rail against America, the Great Satan, as part of their recruiting program. The truth is that

nearly all of them would rather overthrow the governments where they operate rather than ours. Its power they want, and power, like politics, is mostly local. Even the al Qaeda cells have begun to exercise independence. The leaders of the various movements are as selfish and greedy as any other politician you can find. They love the authority they have. That's one reason why you never hear of one of the high-muckety-mucks strapping on a bomb and dying for the cause.

“It's not the Army of Omar in Pakistan or Abu Nidal or Hamas or Hezbollah that we are concerned about. It's the few organizations that really want to do us harm, that would like to nuke Manhattan or D.C., that make me sweat. I have come to the conclusion that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is the principal organization in that category. These guys already have the supremacy in Iran. Nobody can take them on and live to talk about it. It's regional power they are after and they see us as the great impediment standing in their way. As far as we can determine, they support three subset organizations, IRGC-Iraq, IRGC-Syria and IRGC-U.S.

“Baghdad has signed an agreement with the Iranians that commits the Iraqis to recognize anyone who has a paper saying they were émigré's living in Iran to escape Saddam Hussein. The problem is that the Iranian government is the issuing authority for the documents. They are flooding Iraq with their agents using the papers as a subterfuge. In addition, the Iraqis have agreed to let thousands of Iranian Shi'ites visit the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in Southern Iraq. No one in Iraq is keeping track of these people. You can see the problem that creates. A Koran in one hand and an AK-47 in their suitcase.

“The mission of the Iraqi group is to raise enough hell there that we will decide to throw in the towel and pull out. We have identified a number of Shiite leaders in Iraq who are sympathetic to the aims of the Iranian Shiite majority. Some are prominent in the new Iraqi government. They are working behind the scenes to derail any progress the government is making.

“And what is worse, the IRGC has decided that even though al Qaeda is Sunni Muslim, they have enough goals in common that they have entered into an alliance. When the Taliban fell in Afghanistan, many of Osama bin Laden’s lieutenants crossed over into Iran. The Iranian government huffed and puffed and said that they had placed al Qaeda operatives under ‘house arrest’ and that they would be tried. That was horse shit.

“The Syrian IRGC is there to fuck up the Bathist government just enough to keep it from grabbing Iraq when we are gone. It is also the conduit organization that supplies Hezbollah. The IRGC long-range goal is a regional Islamic Empire stretching across the Middle East and totally under their control. They are virulently anti-Semitic, of course, but killing Jews is not their main goal. Again, the Jew-baiting rhetoric is part of their conscription effort. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has already expressed a desire to ‘wipe Israel off the map.’ He claims that the holocaust never happened. His version of the ‘final solution’ is for European nations to donate a portion of their land to relocate the nation of Israel. He is a historical revisionist who insists that Jews are newcomers to the Middle East. Given the opportunity, he would murder them all. When he gets his nukes, he might try to do that just for the hell of it. He’s that nuts. At least, that’s our opinion. His latest claim is that he has thousands of Iranians signed up to become suicide martyrs. Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, I believe the suicide bomber

movement is nature's bizarre way to practice eugenics. It eliminates the morons from the general population."

I smiled at that. "A bit cynical, aren't you?"

"This job makes you that way. But back to Ahmadinejad. There are some, I won't name them, who think he is practicing economics. They say that every time Ahmadinejad makes one of his crazy speeches, it unsettles the oil market and the price of crude goes up. Since Iran is the world's fourth largest producer of oil, that directly benefits their economy. I say that's a stretch. He will kill us if he gets the chance. Anything to get us to leave the Middle East."

I interrupted, "That's all very interesting, but what is your group able to do about it, and why are you telling me all this?"

Grant responded, "The terrorist leadership is a Hydra, with dozens of local leaders. The best way to kill a snake is to cut off its head. And therein lies the goal of our operation. We have targeted three dozen of the select few worldwide who are their true leaders. Five of them are here in the United States. If we can take out the ones in the U.S. it will set their scheme back at least ten years, maybe forever. They are not your average, everyday ragheads. They are sleepers who have moved into positions of power and influence in American society. If I tell you their names, you will recognize at least two of them, I'm sure."

I thought this over, seeing myself assuming the role of Grand High Executioner. If what Grant said was true, I would need some help. Getting to them would not be as simple as what I was used to. They would have people around them who watched out for their welfare and safety. There would be no pop, pop and so long, pal, with this bunch.

I asked, "And these five would be assigned to me?"

Grant answered, "Well yes, some of them would be yours. Maybe all of them, we'll see. Later, after you have polished them off, if you want to continue, there could be further assignments. But five at the most are all we expect from you. After that, you're off the hook, free as a bird."

"And what happens if the locals grab me? What then?"

"We would take you into federal custody and send you into the witness protection program. Your career would be through. We would have as much at stake as you in seeing you out of harm's way."

I said, "Okay, assuming I go along with this zany conspiracy, what sort of assistance can I expect?"

Waldrip, who hadn't said much up to that point, took over. "That would be my job. I will provide all the info you will need regarding the subjects in question. I will also supply you with new identities and cover stories. The dossiers we will hand you are extraordinarily detailed. You'll know every detail of their lives. And you will also know why we want them eliminated."

I leaned back and clasped my hands behind my head. I licked my bottom lip and otherwise tried to appear unsure of what I was going to say. I knew I was going to acquiesce, but wanted to get as many concessions out of them as possible before we shook hands. It would be nice to walk away after I'm through with a million or so of their cash in the bank. Finally, I asked, "Is money a problem, regarding expenses?"

Waldrip answered, "No sweat. Money is the least of our worries. The group has plenty."

I said, "Well, that's good, because here's my proposition. I'll do it, but I want to be able to improve my lifestyle when it's all over. It will be necessary for me to go where I can't be found. I want to go where nobody, even you guys, can find me. I'll tell you where to wire the money. I want \$500,000 per hit, tax-free."

Waldrip frowned. "Are you nuts? We're getting off the track here. We really expect you to do this with only a small amount of compensation. We can't talk our people into that kind of money."

Grant waved him to be silent, saying, "Duncan, if you deliver, we have a deal."

Hmm, I thought. *No argument or bitching. Too easy?* The tiniest worm of doubt began to burrow its way into my mind. But the thought of the alternative that awaited me if I didn't go along squashed the wriggler flat.

I said, "We do have a deal. Now, who are the five candidates?"

Grant said, "We will give you the identities consecutively, one at a time, as you complete each assignment. If you are grabbed, it would be a bad thing for you to know all their names."

"That makes sense. Who's first?"

Grant handed me a manila folder. "His name is Alfred Said. He is an officer in a branch of a foreign bank. It's located in New York."

Waldrip said, "Study the material tomorrow. I'll call you in a couple of days and give you an address where we can meet. Any questions?"

I stood and tucked the file under my arm. "None now. I'll wait to hear from you."

Grant got to his feet and shook my hand. "No easy outs, Duncan. We'll live up to our end of the bargain. You will deal almost exclusively with Joe, but I'll take your calls

if necessary. And one last thing, amateur hour is over. You're no longer an independent agent. Your contract with us requires exclusive rights to your services. Understood?"

I nodded assent.

"And by the way, Judge, off the record, how many did you actually do?"

"Off the record?"

"Yeah."

I put my hand on Grant's shoulder and leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Twenty-one."

He said softly, "Well I'll be damned."

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