

U.S. ELECTION DAY

NOVEMBER 7th, 2000/TUESDAY

Al Qaeda Guesthouse, Rawal Lake, Islamabad, Pakistan

0700 Hours

AL MARRAKECH WAS PISSED.

The American Embassy still stood. Al Qaeda's operation —code named Hornet's Nest One—had failed. He'd have some explaining to do as Osama bin Laden —known within Al Qaeda as 'the Sheikh'—didn't accept failure lightly.

The news from his informant in the Islamabad Police Department was grim. According to him, the Police Commissioner, Ahmed Nazir, was briefed on the attack the night before by Inter Services Intelligence Directorate, the ISI. Nazir was told to stay out since the plotters involved were members of the Pakistan Army. ISI would exert jurisdiction. This served to infuriate Nazir —an ambitious man, full of self-importance—who argued with the ISI Director General, Lt. General Habib Akram. Since the target was located within the confines of the Diplomatic Enclave of Islamabad, Nazir stressed his department had jurisdiction, not the ISI.

Nazir's plea was a waste of energy. The ISI, a maverick organization within the Pakistan Army, did as they pleased backed by the generals. The frustrated Police Commissioner vented to some of his buddies but the news of the plot's discovery only reached Al Marrakech at a quarter to seven. Too late to warn the Al Qaeda co-conspirators willing to go to heaven in a hijacked army helicopter at the Sheikh's request.

Like other Al Qaeda's attacks, Hornet's Nest One was a carefully planned suicide mission. Recruitment of the two army helicopter pilots wasn't difficult given the admiration many in the Pakistan Army's ranks had for the Sheikh, whose goal it was to rid the world of *kuffar* and restore the glorious Muslim Caliphate over which *he* would preside as the new *Khalifa*. The Sheikh's message resonated with enough junior officers, and enlisted soldiers thanks to the inciting al-Jazeera broadcasts about the 'Israeli occupation of the Holy Land and America's support of Israel'.

At 7:00, a Mi-8 —known as Hip—helicopter loaded with fuel, was scheduled to take off on a flight out of Army Headquarters from the Rawalpindi Cantonment, or Pindi Cant, as the locals called it. After a short flight to Islamabad's Diplomatic Enclave --to pick up the Jordanian Defense Attaché and his entourage from their embassy located right across from the U.S. Embassy compound-- it would take them on an hour's journey, along with the three star and two star Pakistani generals on board. The VIP passengers' destination was the Kashmir border on an inspection tour of the Line of Control —known as the LOC--between Pakistan and India.

Instead of landing on the Jordanian Embassy's helipad, the pilots were instructed to change course at the last minute and crash the Hip into the main building in the American Embassy compound. Laden with fuel, it would have made a nice firework display for the Americans on their election day.

The Americans had no clue this was meant to be just a taste of what lay in store for them much closer to home, Al Marrakech thought, though he wasn't privy to the details of the mission.

The plot was uncovered.

Khalid, an informant in the ISI, called on his cell phone to confirm the bad news. As Khalid spoke, the two army helicopter pilots were being interrogated at ISI's headquarters near Aabpara Bazaar in Islamabad. The ISI would soon learn—using ISI's specialized version of 'stress'—that the pilot and co-pilot, were both members of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the virulently anti Shia terrorist group in the Islamic Republic. They were also indirectly affiliated with Al Qaeda as volunteers for martyrdom. In the Pakistan Army, except when at war with India, helicopter pilots not on training exercises were allowed to trade off scheduled flights as long as they officially informed their command. This built in flexibility was seen as a way to boost morale and camaraderie.

As it so happened, the assigned pilot for the trip had a week long family wedding to attend to in his village near Jhelum and was happy to trade places. While the co-pilot was glad to give up yet another boring ride with VIPs to the LOC in exchange for the chance to fly down to the Lahore Cantonment, so he could visit his ailing mother who lived in Lahore.

The plot's discovery was devastating news for Al Marrakech who was in charge of this mission. It was humiliating—given the limited number of people involved in the plot and the level of secrecy that went into the planning—to be told by his Pakistani informant that it was the *Americans* who'd discovered the plot and informed their Pakistani counterparts.

"Are you sure it was the Americans?" asked Al Marrakech in English.

"Positive brother... the ISI weren't pleased about this either...the Police Commissioner's office got wind of this and was happy to point this out to everyone," Khalid fearfully whispered in his sing song Pakistani voice.

"Where are you?"

"I'm waiting for the next bus to Kohat as we discussed," Khalid quickly replied.

"You have changed your appearance," said Al Marrakech more as a statement than a question.

"Of course....I'm... I'm on my way back to the border.

"Good...good. Stay out of sight. Destroy the phone. The journey shouldn't be a problem," Al Marrakech reassured Khalid who sounded scared. "Remember to keep calm... everything's been worked out in advance as you are aware."

"Yes, brother, I know," replied Khalid feeling a bit more reassured.

"May *Allah* protect you."

"May Allah also watch over you."

His instincts told him Khalid wasn't exaggerating the American involvement. The news was disturbing especially since it would irritate the Sheikh's temperament. He might seek his head for this given the high stakes of whatever was planned for next year in America.

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CIA Station, U.S. Embassy, Diplomatic Enclave, Islamabad, Pakistan

0715 Hours

There was no jubilation, nor celebration, at the CIA station in the reconstructed embassy. The U.S. Embassy's—a thirty two acre American oasis— main building barely missed being demolished for a second time in the two and a half decades since it was constructed. A close call. Their Peshawar Section Chief's -Matt Edwards- mysterious Al Qaeda asset provided the details which saved the compound.

Jed Addison, the CIA's Islamabad Station Chief, was on a secure line again with Rick, the Chief of the Bin Laden Station at the CIA's Counterterrorism Center or CTC. Rick was one of seven people who had access to information on their Al Qaeda source—codenamed MAVERICK, but known only to Jed and Edwards [his two control officers] as COWBOY. In reality, it was Edwards who was COWBOY's control officer as he had the closest contact with COWBOY.

One of the task forces at the Bin Laden Station was called TASK FORCE GARNER. It consisted of two analysts whose sole mission was to try to glean this valuable Al Qaeda's source's identity through All Source Intelligence. As CIA's 'need-to-know' protocol dictated, the analysts weren't privy to the specifics involving recruitment, logistical details or any other information in Jed or Edward's sanitized TS-SCI cables thanks to ORCON MAVERICK. As originators, Edwards and Jed were authorized to only release information which couldn't be tracked to any sources and methods involving COWBOY. Information was only released as appropriate and caveated at that.

Rick was anxious for news from the ISI interrogations. As he'd discussed on a number of occasions with Jed, he was concerned about *why* MAVERICK was willing to betray his –Al Qaeda's—cause? Al Qaeda was known for its zealous operatives' devotion to the *jihād* against the *kuffar*. Members were carefully picked, especially those in the Sheikh's inner circle. Sure MAVERICK's demands for diamonds and cash as compensation suggested greed as the sole or primary motive. But Rick's paranoid nature led him to believe this whole exercise might be a distraction or some sort of wild goose chase: the Agency's funds [diamonds and greenbacks] to MAVERICK in reality might be a funding source for lethal terrorist attacks down the road. There were too many unknowns and that made control freaks like Rick uncomfortable.

Jed —tall, lanky, with dirty blond hair and a permanent frown on his thoughtful face—explained it would be a while before he'd get any direct information from the ISI and the details would be questionable at best.

"The DDO has asked if MAVERICK needs to be brought in."

"Matt hasn't received word that the guy's in trouble or needs help from us....but this could change at a moment's notice. Matt's been unable to identify this guy... doesn't know if he's an Arab, a Talib or a Pak. Smart guy... knows he's safer keeping his identity secret since he's playing a very dangerous cat and mouse game."

"Well tell Edwards to make sure we don't lose him...we'd love to get our hands on him to debrief... what worries me is that Zawahiri's too smart not to figure out they've been penetrated and order a hunt for the rat that squealed."

"Agree... but we can't help protect him if he doesn't want us to. Probably worried about the safety of his extended family than his own....hell, he knew his life was on the line once he joined Al Qaeda...only a matter of time before he'd be martyred or die for the cause."

"Yeah, true... but he's too valuable... gotta make an effort to protect him. Make sure you convey this. He's done one hell of a job, but if the guy vanishes, the DDO will be pissed at us for not doing more to bring in the guy," said Rick. "I'm too close to a comfortable retirement in Costa Rica to have shit flying on my watch...so you guys make damn sure to make an offer he can't refuse. If it's money, or a safe passage for his family out of whatever shithole they live in, he needs to be convinced...we can help in return for his cooperation."

"Alright already... beaten this dead horse enough Rick. I'll get Matt on the line again," said Jed in his slow Texas drawl that irritated northeasterners like Rick, who spoke in a rapid fire manner. Jed was on the verge of losing his temper with Rick. Like other paper pushers back at Langley, Rick tried to micromanage what went on in the field thousands of miles away. Field operatives felt they were often treated like kids, and these stupid adults were saying: "now this is how we tie shoe laces..."

As new field officers quickly discovered, those back at Langley thought they knew better even if they rarely set foot outside of the place. Almost all fieldwork came under intense scrutiny. Second guessing by the cubicle dwellers was the norm now, especially with all the improved communication capabilities which only worsened the situation for operatives in the field. This micro managing drove them crazy. Worse, many old hands felt 'de-balled' as one put it by careerists who wanted to play it safe. Far too many good field officers resigned because of this management style. Those who stayed on either tried to hide stuff or toed the line but lost their enthusiasm and dedication.

“Ok Jed...glad we’re able to uncover this before the shit hit the fan, especially since the mother fuckers planned it to coincide with our election, probably as a fucking gift of some sort. Had they succeeded so soon after the goddamn Cole disaster, we’d be in deep shit as far as Congress is concerned. These sons-o-bitches are getting damn serious about attacking us. I’d say we tell Matt to demand MAVERICK comes in or...”

“*Or what Rick,*” Jed interrupted. “We can’t threaten him with squat since we don’t even know his fuckin’ identity?” Jed spat out in frustration. “And, how dependable is his info considerin’ he’s the first guy to sell out on their goddam’ cause for Uncle Sam’s greenbacks? Ya know these scum bags are never reliable...he’ll only tell us what we want to hear and leave out the good stuff.”

“Well let Matt know... guy needs the kid glove treatment” said Rick. “Keep me posted. I’ll be here.”

“Will do,” said Jed as he hung up.

Jed felt a migraine coming on. It bothered him that Al Qaeda tried to strike again on the heels of the USS Cole attack in the Gulf of Aden. The brazenness of these planned attacks was worrisome. Less than a month before —October 12th—a thousand dollar boat packed with explosives and three suicide bombers on board crippled a quarter of a billion dollar American destroyer in the port of Aden. Seventeen American sailors were killed and thirty wounded. The blast ripped a forty by sixty foot wide hole in the ship’s reinforced steel hull. Military analysts at Langley concluded that had they been better sailors and positioned their boat in a slightly different angle, the bombers would have killed three hundred or so and sent the USS Cole to the bottom of the harbor.

And now this close call...it’s just a matter of time when these bastards are going to bring this embassy down again, Jed thought grimly.

The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad —newly constructed at a cost of twenty two million dollars in 1976— was vandalized and destroyed on November 21st, 1979, by a frenzied mob. The day before this assault, the *Ka’aba*, the holiest shrine in Islam, was captured by hardcore *Wahhabis* just days after the *Hajj*. The angry mob believed Pakistani media reports that the U.S. government was somehow behind the lethal assault on the *Ka’aba*, located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Turned out a former Saudi theology student announced he was the *Mahdi* dispatched by *Allah* as forecast in the *Qur’an*. With his followers, he launched a violent ambush by opening fire on worshippers around the *Ka’aba*.

After the embassy attack, all essential personnel were relocated to the USAID building. It was located outside the Diplomatic Enclave near the original National Assembly in the G-6 area of Islamabad, which was Pakistan’s sterile but modern Capital. The temporary CIA station in the AID building consisted of three windowless rooms on the fifth floor. The office was so crowded that the officers took turns using the few desks and telephones.

It took half a decade to rebuild the destroyed embassy compound and the CIA station in Islamabad — once again- occupied decent office space on the third floor in the rebuilt building which resembled a forbidding fortress. The embassy’s new structure provided a false sense of security. The enemy decided to exploit the compound’s one weakness: its airspace.

Without COWBOY, Al Qaeda’s mission would’ve been a success, Jed reminded himself, as he picked up the secure phone, the STU, to call Edwards who was a 100 miles to the west in Peshawar.

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Al Qaeda Guesthouse, Rawal Lake, Islamabad 0715 Hours

Al Marrakech paced the smoky room, deep in thought, puffing hard on a Camel brand cigarette. It occurred to him that if someone had betrayed them to the Americans, this would be unprecedented within the tightly knit structure of Al Qaeda. All members of the group were carefully handpicked for their ability

to withstand hardship and torture. They were all dedicated to the cause and willing to martyr themselves for Al Qaeda's mission: to destroy the *kuffar*, and all *murtadds*.

Every member of Al Qaeda was aware of the consequences of betrayal: their slow torturous death videotaped, followed by the death of some identifiable relatives and friends. As part of their training, recruits to the cause were shown just such a video of a traitor who stole from the Sheikh. It had the desired effect as he so vividly remembered.

Al Marrakech was a patient man, used to disappointment, hardship and aborted missions. But Khalid's news had left him in a dark rage. It was a betrayal of their noble cause from within since Al Qaeda had never been penetrated. The CIA, Mossad, MI-6, ISI, the Iranians, even the Saudis, all tried and failed to penetrate their ranks. It would, however, take only *one* traitor in their midst to destroy the walls of trust they'd built over the years. The dedication of Al Qaeda's operatives to the organization and its Sheikh was a source of pride. Penetration had proved impossible for their enemies. The same could not be said for other terrorist groups.

Until now.

He hadn't felt so enraged since the Moroccan Olympic Committee refused him a slot on their 1992 Olympic Team when he'd qualified for the 5000 meters. His jihadi connections supposedly were the reason for their decision. The Moroccan officials didn't want to risk the possibility of any trouble while their team was in Barcelona. It proved to be fuel for his zealous fire. The disappointment pushed him over the edge. Al Marrakech decided to apply his physical talents to fighting the *kuffar* and the *mushrikun*. Joining Al Qaeda had been relatively easy thanks to his cousin, Fahd, who was an active member, and an *Afghan Arab*. In 1996, with Fahd's help, he made the mandatory pilgrimage to Afghanistan via Pakistan to reach Al Qaeda's training camps in the *Hindu Kush* Mountains. There he'd been selected for commando training.

The curriculum consisted of eight phases and lasted up to ten months. Not wishing to martyr himself, he wasn't selected to complete only the first three phases, which was the minimum training period. This was the emergency training course taken by those who volunteered, and were selected, for martyrdom operations.

Phase One of Al Qaeda's training was known as 'The Establishment.' It lasted thirty days and concentrated on mental indoctrination and religious training. This training involved extensive mental and physical examinations. Some of the poorly educated trainees or those who suffered from certain physical ailments were removed during this phase. Al Marrakech, although not as educated as some of his peers — several of whom possessed advanced professional degrees—was smart and had, as part of the requirements for being considered for the Moroccan Olympic program, completed the high school equivalency tests and passed.

Phase Two --*Al-Rad*-- lasted two months. The *mujahidin* received basic military training in conjunction with jihadist indoctrination. During Phase Two, he pledged his life to the jihad against the *kuffar*.

Phase Three was the guerrilla phase. Two months long, it provided additional military training such as small unit tactics, with individual weapons and/or detonation of suicide vests or other explosive devices and various tradecraft skills such as evasion/deception. Those on the crash course to undertake martyrdom operations graduated after this phase and were sent on their missions or to join a sleeper cell.

Phase Four --*Jundallah*-- was the most rigorous and dangerous training for the potential *mujahidin*. Additional training in automatic weapons and explosives was provided, to include the construction of IEDs and EFPs. While he went through this training, it was primarily for Al Qaeda's foot soldiers and its support assets. This lasted nine weeks.

Phase Five --*Doshaga*-- was a thirty day course where the trainees were taught basic hand to hand combat skills. Al Marrakech's physical prowess hadn't gone unnoticed. Where many would collapse due to exhaustion and pain, he refused to give in to what he considered were minor inconveniences in the larger scheme of things.

Phase Six --Do Milla-- a three week long course which trained them on the use of shoulder-fired weapons, such as the RPG-7, SA-7 Surface-to-Air Missile and the Milan Anti-Tank Missile. This phase was reserved for only the brightest and most promising *mujahidin*. He was proud to have been selected.

Phase Seven --Zik Zak--trained Al Marrakech on the Dushka Machine-Gun, mortars, BM Launchers and the basic operation of Tanks. Training lasted three weeks.

Phase Eight --the Launching-- the final week marked the graduation of fully trained *mujahidin*. The *mujahid* was required to prepare a will and was sent to his designated assignment or cell.

As a result of his dedication and physical skills during the grueling process, he caught the attention of the Sheikh himself. It was only a matter of time before he became a cell leader in Al Qaeda.

Now twenty eight years old, Hasan Al Marrakech was tall by Moroccan standards at six-foot-one, with black hair, brown eyes and an olive complexion. He was self-conscious of the scars on his handsome face and neck due to a bad case of acne as a teen, although one would never know it from his bearing. Raised in the slums of bustling Marrakech, he was a man mature beyond his years with tremendous discipline and an ability to withstand hardship and deprivation.

He channeled his strength and determination into a popular sport in Marrakech: long distance running. It was cheap, easy and eventually helped him leave behind his wretched surroundings. It also saved him from the neighborhood bullies and the screaming shopkeepers, who chased him to get their unpaid-for-goods back. They never did catch him. No one could run like him, nor did they have his endurance --born from an inner will to succeed and escape.

Although he didn't like his assigned *nom de guerre* because it reminded him of his past, the Sheikh insisted that within the inner Al Qaeda circle they were to refer to each other by their assigned *nom de guerre* or last names. He wasn't provided an explanation for this and no one dare question the Sheikh on his decision. Not even Ayman Zawahiri, the number two man in Al Qaeda--questioned the Sheikh on any of his decisions or choices.

This unquestionable *taqlid* disturbed him. It could pose a potential problem for the organization down the line, but he knew better than to voice his opinion. Unquestionable devotion or obedience, *taqlid*, to the Sheikh was the pillar of their mission. Unlike many of the Sheikh's sycophantic followers, Al Marrakech felt that one could be devoted to someone *and* still question a specific action of their leader. Even the *Rasul* Muhammad himself, May Allah Bestow his Blessings on Him, was not infallible and admitted this, as reflected in the *Hadiths*.

Al Marrakech buzzed the intercom. The *bearer*, Jabar, appeared in his white starched, long *kurta* with *cummerbund* and white turban, the British colonial outfit for waiters which made him look almost comical.

"Bring me a cup of coffee and some more Camels," he said in Arabic with a slight hint of his native *Maghrebi* accent.

"Of course Hasan, as you wish," Jabar replied, using Al Marrakech's first name as instructed. He bowed his head and quickly removed himself from the smoky room.

Jabar, an Omani employee at the guest house for the last three years, immediately sensed his boss's dark mood and knew better than to hang around. The bedroom was warm and cozy thanks to the gas heater, but the heavy smoke made the air suffocating. Hasan had chain smoked packs of cigarettes. The bed was made which meant his boss hadn't slept.

Something must be up, thought Jabar, as he walked down the corridor which led to the kitchen area.

Hasan's cigarette brand of choice was Camels; while Omar, the arrogant jerk, preferred Dunhill. Jabar wondered why these sons-of-camels didn't smoke the local cigarettes like the K-2 brand? At least they were widely available at the corner kiosk and were cheap as well. But no, they had to have the smuggled stuff, usually only available at the bigger, fancier Super Markets, like Jinnah or Aabpara, which required a drive into Islamabad since the guest house was on the outskirts of the Capital.

The Al Qaeda guest house was located near Rawal Dam, not too far from the intersection of the old Murree-Pindi road --called Club road-- built during the British colonial period. Once on this road, one

could drive south east towards Rawalpindi or take a right and drive west to Islamabad, or stay on the road and go north to the scenic bustling resort town called Murree in the foothills of the Karakorum Mountains.

Time to send Yaqub to the Aabpara Market to get more boxes of Camels. Hasan isn't in a good mood today. I better make sure he doesn't decide to take it out on me, thought Jabar fearfully as he returned to the kitchen.

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“Get up you oaf, and drive your smelly donkey’s ass down to Aabpara now,” Jabar screamed at Yaqub, the cook’s helper cum occasional driver, in fluent Urdu. “I need ten containers of Camels, a two pound bag of Brooke Bond tea, a pound of chickpeas and five pounds of sugar,” he shouted as though Yaqub was deaf.

“Did you say ten containers of Camels and five pounds of sugar?” Yaqub asked in Urdu in the politest tone he could muster since these Arabs couldn’t speak Kashmiri, his mother tongue. Most did not even make the effort to learn Urdu, Pakistan’s national language.

Except for some Arab low life like this screaming oaf, Yaqub thought with contempt as he smiled and shook his head to show acknowledgement and subservience to the fiend before him.

“Yes, yes...no wait, you’d better get two containers of Dunhill as well and don’t forget the other stuff... here’s 5000 rupees and make sure you bring back the receipt and any change or I’ll have your hide. *Do you understand, you idiot?*” Jabar shouted at him in Urdu as though he was deaf.

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ll be on my way,” replied Yaqub as he moved towards the door.

Yaqub, who’d worked at the guest house for only six months, was amazed at how much, and how often, these Arabs spent money. It was as though their money grew on trees, he thought feeling a tinge of envy. But he made a decent salary of 1900 rupees a month. With the free room and board, he could afford to send almost all of it back home to his village near Muzzafarabad to support his wife, six kids and his elderly parents. He didn’t mind the constant humiliation or the verbal abuse from these Arabs as long as they paid him. Some of his fellow villagers worked as migrant laborers in the *Khaleej*. They, too, spoke of the cruelty of some of the Gulf Arabs, not to mention their arrogance. But they were able to buy freezers, TVs and stereos to send back home. Their families would proudly show off their new found wealth in the hopes of improving their social status in the village through the purchase of such luxuries. These appliances would be displayed in the one or two room adobe homes. That his village was without electricity was irrelevant. The logic was that such purchases were proof of the family’s newly acquired wealth. Once electricity reached their village, they’d be put to good use as well.

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Al Marrakech began to pace the room...Al-Jazeera was on, with the volume turned down on the TV. Two Arab broadcasters —a man in his mid-40s and a young woman. A woman, he spat at the thought, dressed like a whore with a face covered with so much make up that she looked like a clown to him.

He had no use for women, but plenty for boys. His particular preference was Afghan boys, whose almond shaped eyes made up with black kohl eyeliner made him insane with lust. These boys usually were far more cooperative than the Moroccan ones. They didn’t scream and some actually seemed to enjoy themselves. It was his one weakness. The other: an obsession with French cologne, which had led him on his shoplifting binges in Marrakech and races to get away from irate shopkeepers or their assistants.

He’d quickly discovered upon his arrival in Afghanistan that Afghan society was characterized by unresolved contradictions. The sexual antics of the *Madrassas* —which produced the Sheikh’s current hosts, the Taliban— seemed to have helped make the Taliban homophobic. But within their ranks there were a significant number engaged in homosexual behavior courtesy of their stays in these religious boarding schools for boys.

Al Marrakech was familiar with the Taliban foot soldiers' predilections, having indulged with them in some activity that would be considered grounds for execution under the Taliban's own public decree on the subject. The method was as brutal as was to be expected under the medieval Taliban: a wall would be collapsed onto the culprits, burying them alive in the debris. If one of the accused survived his ordeal, he was set free as this was seen as a sign of *Allah's* mercy.

He puffed hard on his cigarette. He knew it was time to make the dreaded call. But first he wanted to speak to Omar who was on his way back to the guesthouse.

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Trail 3 Parking Lot, Margalla National Park, F/6/3, Islamabad

0735 Hours

Omar bin Yousef —Al Marrakech's number two in the cell—was 25 years old, with a dark complexion, a scar on his left cheek and a mean scowl which permanently seemed to occupy his mouth. He was prone to violence in a cruel sort of way. Unlike Al Marrakech, who resorted to the use of force only when absolutely necessary, Omar was trigger happy. He relished any opportunity to indulge in sadistic cruelty. Convinced of his superiority, he treated those under his charge with contempt and subjected them to various forms of abuse. Omar was a superb marksman, who was also talented with the sword and knife. He'd personally performed some of As-Sahab's — Al Qaeda's media wing— videotaped executions by beheading its enemies. At Al Qaeda's training camp, Omar displayed unusual talent as a sniper. Unlike Al Marrakech, he wasn't selected to join the inner circle, nor made a cell leader, because of his impulsive cruelty and lack of leadership skills. Omar, however, was dedicated to his brothers —especially the Sheikh—in Al Qaeda and became an invaluable member of Al Marrakech's cell as his deputy.

In Hornet's Nest One, Omar was assigned the task of bearing witness to the destruction of the American Embassy by discretely filming the crash for another 'propaganda of the deed' opportunity. It was an important component of Al Qaeda's modus operandi in order to get the greatest bang for every terrorist buck spent. For Al Qaeda, this war with the West and its allies involved a multi-pronged strategy and information warfare, or psy ops as it used to be called, was a critical component. Since it was much weaker than its *kuffar* enemy, both in numbers and resources, Al Qaeda resorted to inventive ways to pursue its goal of ultimately winning the long struggle. Necessity is the mother of invention and Al Qaeda's cadre quickly discovered that conducting a terror attack did not necessarily get it, or its rich benefactors, the best return on their investment. By recording its own handiwork and widely disseminating it globally, Al Qaeda hoped to maximize the return it sought: to instill terror in to the hearts of the western crusaders and their allies. Destroying the Great Satan's embassy would help convey to its enemies that it meant business and was capable of extraordinary attacks.

Instructed to hike up the popular 'Trail 3' of the Margalla National Park to 'the Viewpoint,' as the observation deck was called, the ascent was a little steep and strenuous at first and took him almost thirty minutes to reach the top. It was a popular early morning hike with Islamabad's elite and offered a panoramic view of the Diplomatic Enclave, which lay just to the north east. And, it also provided a good visual on the various government buildings, including the Secretariat, Parliament and the President's House, all of which lay just below to the east.

The purpose of his trip was to use the site — a perfect vantage point—to observe and film the unfolding destruction and 'fireworks' at the U.S. Embassy courtesy of the crashed Army helicopter. Along with the other hikers, he would have the chance, and reason, to gawk at the mayhem below. Like some of the others at the top, he'd pretend to be videotaping the scenic view and just happen to record the unfolding crash scene. Once accomplished, he'd call Al Marrakech to exclaim about the tragedy he'd witnessed.

Actions of an innocent bystander.

Instead, Omar now sat in his black Pajero —the local name by which Mitsubishi sold its Monteros in Pakistan—puffing hard on his Dunhill cigarette. It was 7:35. he heard the news when Al Marrakech called his assigned cell phone as he was almost at the top. The ‘party’ was off and he was slowly, and circuitously, to drive back to the guesthouse from the parking lot, located at the junction of Margalla Road and Ataturk Avenue. The Margalla road ran parallel to the Margalla hills and the parking lot was built to accommodate the needs of affluent, fitness oriented Islamabadians who parked their cars and hiked the well maintained trail to the top of one of the scenic viewpoints overlooking the modern capital. It was a busy hiking trail, especially in the early morning hours before work. Omar went unnoticed in the parking lot because it wasn’t unusual for people to sit in their vehicles as they waited for friends, or lovers, before some of them proceeded towards the trailhead or to the small park that lay at the base of the hills. The less adventurous would stay in their cars while their companions completed their exercise regimen.

He put the Pajero into gear to back out when he noticed the arrival of a black Mercedes sedan with the Pakistan Army logo on both of the flags located on the two front corners of the gleaming bumper. As luck would have it, the official vehicle came to a halt in the vacant space to Omar’s right. Curiosity, as well as training, led to a change plans. He turned off the engine and slowly lowered his tinted window half way.

Omar watched through his sunglasses as the driver —an enlisted soldier of some unrecognizable rank—jumped out and moved quickly towards the trailhead which was sixty feet away. He carried two towels. Five minutes later, two middle aged Pakistani men dressed in blue and green tracksuits came down the trail. Their short, military style, haircuts were a dead giveaway. They grabbed the towels from the driver and continued to move towards their vehicle. One animatedly talked into his cell phone, while the other walked closely alongside trying to listen in on the conversation.

As Pakistani flag officers are wont to do, they carried on their conversation in English. “Majid, we need to get to HQ. General Mustafa himself is going to be present for the brief on the failed hijacking attempt,” said the sweaty officer who’d been talking on the cell phone.

“Yes, this is very bad news. *What’s happened to our army?* I still can’t believe it...that one of our own chaps would be willing to commit such a heinous act and kill themselves in the process. They must have forgotten that Islam forbids suicide,” the second officer replied with a look of disbelief on his face. “For them to even consider such a *haram* act is beyond reprehensible and they must pay for this.”

As the men in the tracksuits quickly approached their vehicle, the driver of the black Pajero parked next to their sedan was standing in front of his car’s open hood. To the casual observer, it looked like the driver was working to fix an engine problem.

Pakistanis —by and large a helpful, and curious people—under normal circumstances would have inquired as to the Pajero’s problem and if they could be of assistance. This would especially be the case with those who could afford a ride in a Mercedes, since a Pajero driver signified someone of their own social status.

But the men were in a hurry and didn’t even bother to acknowledge the driver. And their driver was not about to slow down their departure by offering his services with the two generals present.

“Majid, haven’t I said before; it was just a matter of time when the extremists amongst us would try to commit such an act?” said the first officer as he waited for the driver to open his door.

“Yes, yes, Abdul. The good news is their apprehension before they could succeed,” the one named Majid said, trying to sound reassuring as he spoke in a booming voice over the roof of the car to his colleague, as he too waited on his side for the driver to formally let him in to the car as protocol dictated.

“Yes, but it was the *Americans*, of all people, who warned us in our own country! Mustafa isn’t going to be happy about that, that’s for sure,” Abdul replied in an incredulous tone as he entered his —the left—side.

Omar couldn’t believe his luck. Although Khalid had been on their payroll for some time now and was considered a very reliable source within the ISI, one could never be 100% certain if the information provided was accurate. There was always an element of risk involved: had the asset been turned into a double agent and set a trap for them? Or was their information incorrect or incomplete? Omar knew he

could report back to Hasan that he'd obtained the *source* of the revelation to the Pakistanis: the *Americans*. That the Americans had delivered the alarming intel to the Pakistanis in their own country would've riled the Pakistanis even more than the fact that they had almost lost one of their Hip helicopters, along with two of their generals.

How the fuck did the Americans find out about our operation? Omar thought angrily as he drove out of the parking lot. This news won't be well received by the Sheikh or Zawahiri. It's time to get back to Hasan. *Thanks be to Allah that I'm not in his shoes today.*

* * *

Al Qaeda Guesthouse, Rawal Lake, Islamabad

0800 Hours

The guesthouse was located off Mangla Road, down a quarter mile narrow driveway lined with heavy foliage of various kinds. At 1,700 feet, Islamabad —Pakistan's modern capital—was on a plateau, bordered on the west by the Margalla Hills, which were the foothills to the rugged Karakorum Mountains and to the northeast rose the Himalayan foothills. Due east, lay the plains of Punjab —'Land of Five Rivers'-- and India.

Before the 1960s, there was no capital at this location which came to be called 'Islamabad' —'place or abode of Islam'. In 1960, the President, General Ayub Khan, decided to move the capital from Karachi, Pakistan's major port and city, to a location that was an hour's drive away from his ancestral village near the town of Abbottabad located in the NWFP, the land of the Pashtuns. The city that arose from a few sleepy villages was a modern, planned city with buildings with architectural pretensions that strove to give one the illusion of being in a wealthy European city, and not in the capital of a country where the average per capita income was around \$300. It seemed ironic to newly arrived Americans that the President's House in Pakistan's capital made their own White House look like a shack in comparison. Some concluded —rightfully or wrongfully—that the Pakistanis felt they had something to prove.

The guesthouse was near the Diplomatic Enclave, located on the outskirts of town. Thanks to Khalid's call, Al Marrakech's aborted plans to sit outside on the patio after his *fajr* prayers and wait for the telltale signs of fire: smoke.

After his call to Omar, he took a walk in the well maintained garden behind the guesthouse. The place was enclosed by a twelve foot high brick wall topped with glass shards and relied on discreet security cameras that 24/7 recorded all activity around its perimeter. Although winter was near, it was a beautiful autumn day. It was sunny and pleasant, with the temperature in the upper 60s.

Al Marrakech sat down in one of the bamboo chairs located by a small fountain whose water cascaded into a small pond with an assortment of goldfish. The garden was an oasis of lush, carefully manicured grass with beds of magnolias, sweet smelling jasmine and *raat ki rani*. He felt far from tranquil when he heard the door to the garden being pushed open. Omar quickly walked towards him and nodded his head in greeting as he approached. As he slowly nodded in response and motioned to Omar to sit down next to him, he noted Omar's excited demeanor.

"As *Salaam-Alaikum*, Hasan," said Omar aware of the necessity of greeting Al Marrakech by his first name.

"*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam.*"

"Brother, I have some important news for you," Omar excitedly blurted out.

"And pray, what news do you have for me?"

Omar quickly proceeded to fill him in on the conversation he'd overheard at the Margalla parking lot.

Al Marrakech —through a sheer stroke of luck or coincidence—had just confirmed one of his ISI informants, Khalid's, information. Now he knew the information was credible —thanks to two sources: Hornet's Nest One failed because the *Americans*, and not the Pakistanis, had gotten wind of the

operation. He knew what the reaction of those in the inner circle would be, but had no idea how the alleged mastermind —the mysterious Baluchi who went by his initials, KSM—would react to this discovery. He'd never met the man.

He instructed Omar to get some refreshment from the kitchen as he headed back inside for one of his cell phones.

Al Marrakech dialed a number in Peshawar.

Told to call another number as part of an elaborate security protocol, he used another cell phone and waited for the phone to be answered. His heart pounded and his hands felt cold and clammy.

"*As Salaam-Alaikum*," said Abdullah Awad, Abu Hamza's assistant. "What's your news?" he continued in his soft Arabic dialect.

"*Wa-Alaikum-As-Salaam*," replied Al Marrakech in a quiet, respectful voice. "I'm afraid I bring bad news, may *Allah* forgive me."

After he briefed Awad through code words, Awad replied: "The news indeed is not good. Our Sheikh won't be pleased with these developments. But the cause is greater than the sum parts and with *Allah's* blessings we will prevail over the infidel and all apostates. Omar's fortuitous discovery was *Allah's* handiwork. He wanted to guide us to a more urgent task than the mission at hand. To seek out and eliminate the traitor in our midst so that our much bigger objective next year does not fail."

"Yes, this does seem to be the case," Al Marrakech replied with relief as he realized his head would be spared.

"Call me back in ten minutes using a new phone. Call the 6th number on your list...you will then be told what to do next," said the Sheikh's assistant.

Exactly ten minutes later, Al Marrakech did as instructed. Told to hold, and then Awad was on the line again: "Your new orders are as follows: find the mole and his American handler. Eliminate them after you have sufficiently interrogated them. The Sheikh will want to know if our major objective next year has been compromised."

"Yes, brother...I..." he began, but Awad interrupted him: "This is very important, you *must not fail*."

"Yes brother, immediately. Trust me. I won't fail the Sheikh," Al Marrakech replied in his guttural Arabic, trying to sound earnest without coming across as overly so. "I will bring you two heads on a platter," he continued. He knew if he failed in his latest assignment, his own head would probably be on the platter instead.

"*Inshallah...inshallah*. The Sheikh will be arriving soon at the usual place. He needs to meet you in person then. I will send details later today."

"Ofcourse...I will be honored to be in his great presence. I shall await your instructions brother," replied Al Marrakech with all the humility he could muster to hide his growing anxiety.

NOVEMBER 7th, 2000/TUESDAY

19 Circular Road, University Town, Peshawar, Pakistan

0705 Hours

EDWARDS WAS RELIEVED BUT WORRIED.

COWBOY proved to be the mother lode. The CIA seemed to have penetrated Al Qaeda's inner structure. For the Agency, and other intelligence agencies, Al Qaeda was a tough nut to crack. Its cadre comprised of ideologically driven zealots who believed *Allah* had chosen them to lead the *jihad* against those who derailed *Allah's* wishes of ensuring a global *umma* of true believers. This perception drove them to destroy anyone, through any means, who was a threat to their long term goal of replicating seventh century Islamic rule. Penetrating such an organization was tough. Such men [and they were all men in the inner circle] couldn't be enticed by temptations involving money, women or drugs. Temptations which normally worked on most people who joined various other causes didn't prove effective with these folk and that made Edward's job of tracking Al Qaeda in its birthplace a difficult one.

Until COWBOY —officially designated MAVERICK-- made contact.

COWBOY's information had saved the embassy. Edwards would've loved to be a fly on the wall in the cell where the wannabe martyrs were being interrogated by ISI at their Islamabad headquarters. The ISI —who often played double or even triple games—couldn't be trusted to do their job in a humane and results oriented manner. But they sure could spin some amazing yarns. Never knew with them if they *really* were an ally or were playing you off against another to further their own shifting agenda.

When Jed called to congratulate him on a job well done, he told him he didn't deserve any credit since COWBOY —although not a walk-in— had contacted him and not vice versa. Unlike a normal recruitment, where the case officer controls the recruitment and calls all the shots; this time it was the other way around, which was disconcerting to say the least. The primary reason why this didn't sit well was because, from the get go, COWBOY acted like *he* was the control officer and set the parameters of this 'relationship.' The ball was in COWBOY's court, and the only reason Edwards even played, once he realized this wasn't some crazy lunatic or black mailer, was because some valuable information provided as a freebie, passed muster and had established COWBOY's bona fides.

The dynamics of how they'd established contact [the source seeking him out] wasn't something he'd been taught at 'the Farm,' the CIA's DO training facility near Williamsburg, Virginia. It had been *too easy* and that worried him. In their line of work nothing ever was 'too easy, too simple, or too attainable' unless it was an ambush or a double game. If this had indeed been the case, then most of his fellow operatives would have normal lives, with typical families and jobs, along with the usual worries and concerns. But the evidence spoke to the contrary: nothing was easy, clear, simple or attainable in the spy business. It was a thankless, often boring, anonymous job except for the few lucky breaks when one's

accomplishments made all the sacrifices worthwhile. But it was a rare bastard who got so lucky and even then there was never any *public* acknowledgment. Many ended up paranoid drunks and/or bitter and disgruntled.

What bothered him was his inability to control this relationship. Much as he tried to lead rather than be led, he'd failed to convince COWBOY to revise his modus operandi to suit his. COWBOY's 'rules of engagement' didn't qualify him to be called an agent; although Rick had MAVERICK anonymously catalogued as one. For Rick this was just another notch on the belt which made the Bin Laden Station look good.

Edwards thought the term 'agent' didn't describe his informant. An 'agent' was someone who was identified by a case officer to be recruited and cultivated. The case officer, as his 'control officer,' would then give the agent 'tasks.' Instead, it was the source [COWBOY] who'd approached Edwards, not the other way around. COWBOY knew his own value and thus could dictate the terms of the interaction with his 'handler.'

COWBOY's information confirmed his bonafides. It led the FBI to an Al Qaeda Brooklyn sleeper cell of four who planned a number of simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York subway system. And, he'd also hinted at a big attack in America sometime in the future in his typed note.

It then took a fistful of one carat diamonds and four bundles of twenty dollar bills tightly wrapped in plastic, left at a dead drop in the dilapidated Tehkal Cemetery [known as Gora Qabiristan or the White, i.e. English, Cemetery] in Peshawar's Defense Colony, to continue this lucrative relationship.

COWBOY insisted on picking the dead drops and the communication methods. COWBOY was pretty slick. The cemetery site was ideal for a number of reasons and this suggested two things. One, he knew Peshawar and its environs pretty well as a local or a long term resident would; and second, he was dealing with a professional.

The overgrown brownstone grave COWBOY chose was distinctive in the large cemetery. Edwards tasked one of the analysts at TASK FORCE GARNER to research the cemetery and, in particular, the grave site selected as the dead drop. He gave no reason but made clear their research would help with his ongoing assessment of MAVERICK.

The occupant of this particular grave, a Reverend Isidor Loewenthal [1827-1864] turned out to be an unusual fellow. Born into an orthodox Jewish family in Poland, he'd converted to Christianity and graduated from Princeton's Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Then he moved to Peshawar as an evangelist missionary. Fluent in Pashto, Loewenthal translated the New Testament into Pashto and was compiling a Pashto Dictionary when he was accidentally shot by one of his own guards. His ornate and unusual tombstone had the only large elaborate Celtic cross, which was in excellent condition. Like the rest of the rundown cemetery, the grave site was overgrown which made concealment with the hollow spikes easy.

COWBOY then provided details of a planned Al Qaeda attack on the ARAMCO compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. This information led to the capture of six members of an Al Qaeda cell in Dhahran for which COWBOY was generously compensated via Loewenthal's gravesite.

COWBOY next shared the plans for the U.S. Embassy attack. Again, after a substantial sum of money and diamonds were left at another dead drop at the cemetery.

This time COWBOY picked the gravesite of Albert Mew [1889-1920], a British soldier. TASK FORCE GARNER would later unearth additional details on Lance Bombardier Mew of the Royal Garrison Artillery of No. 6, Mountain Battery. He was killed in combat operations at Kaniguram, South Waziristan on March 20th, 1920 and was buried in the Tehkal Cemetery. The Task Force's frustrated analysts couldn't figure out the implication, if any, of MAVERICK's selection of these particular gravesites.

Edwards' intuition led him to believe there was some sort of significance to COWBOY's choices, though he could be wrong. But in his business, no pun intended, no stone was to be left unturned. It was worth a shot. To try to figure out if this behavior had some sort of symbolic or operationally relevant connotations.

COWBOY had delivered three times now which made him both unusual and highly valuable. The price tag for future exchanges would probably be a lot higher if the relationship could be sustained given the value of the information provided; but also because, with each disclosure, COWBOY risked the possibility of being discovered and silenced. Problem was Edwards tour of duty was up in December and COWBOY wasn't amenable to working with anyone else.

Generally, as a stingy intelligence organization, his bosses emphasized haggling; a skill that characterized every bazaar transaction in this part of the world. In the West, such extensive bargaining would be considered insulting and in poor taste; but here it was expected even by terrorists selling their wares or cause. Delivery of the information on the Islamabad Embassy plot was one of the Agency's silent victories overseas. A significant achievement for two reasons: First, unlike the two 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa, the CIA was successful in preventing a similar attack in Pakistan. Second, the outgoing Clinton administration was spared an embarrassment on Election Day.

* * *

Circular Road was a tree lined street in the prestigious University Town, a western suburb of sprawling dusty Peshawar. It was inhabited by affluent citizens and expatriates. Most of the expatriates were there in some sort of diplomatic capacity in the various consulates, or worked for the numerous humanitarian organizations. After the Soviets blitzkrieged into Afghanistan in December of 1979, the NWFP and the FATA, which abut Afghanistan, became the launching pad for *mujahidin* activity across the border. And, Peshawar became a hotbed of activity. Expatriates arrived to provide much needed services to the millions of Afghan refugees forced to flee their villages to seek shelter in the refugee camps that arose on the outskirts of Peshawar and elsewhere in Pakistan's NWFP. One of these aid workers was none other than Al Qaeda's 'Sheikh' Osama bin Laden, who was from a wealthy family with deep roots in Yemen's Hadhramaut region.

Edwards sat in his favorite old leather chair in the study, which also doubled as sleeping quarters with his own bed placed in one corner of the large room. His spacious single story brick bungalow had white marble floors and high ceilings. It was too large for a bachelor who hated throwing parties and was infrequently there, but he didn't have a choice in the matter: it was assigned to house the Vice-Consul at the U.S. Consulate in Peshawar. He was the Vice-Consul, the diplomatic cover for the CIA section chief in Peshawar.

This bureaucratic rule of the State Department—to house certain diplomats at specific sites outside the wire [i.e. an Embassy compound]- from a clandestine operative's perspective was an unnecessary workplace hazard that made no sense, yet was stubbornly adhered to because revolving homes would be far too complex for the logisticians to handle. This regulation remained in place even after some CIA station chiefs were identified by their place of residence and targeted, such as William Buckley. Buckley, the Beirut station chief, was kidnapped, tortured and brutally murdered by *Hizballah* in the mid-1980s.

He'd closed off most of the house and left the sheets on the government issued furnishings in all the five large bedrooms and the drawing room. Although U.S. diplomats had to accept both the house they were assigned, as well as the accompanying furnishings, they were entitled to ship up to 5000 pounds of personal items, along with a private vehicle courtesy of Uncle Sam. He'd shipped his Amish made bed with its new Sleep Comfort mattress he'd bought in Pennsylvania's Amish country, along with an accompanying chest of drawers and night stand. It was a beautifully crafted, sturdy piece of work: the carved pine head board was one of a kind. He also brought the now well worn brown leather chair he'd inherited from his parents. The other personal items included his large book collection and his wardrobe. The rest of his personal belongings were in storage—to include family photos albums and other such memorabilia—in Alexandria, Virginia.

He lived next door to the popular American Club. Whenever he craved a cold beer and some company, he availed himself of the club's services. A night at the club was never dull. An eclectic bunch of

NGOs, journalists, adventurers, spies and diplomats hung out there, often in their own separate cliques. The club membership was unofficially restricted to U.S. government employees and to foreigners, as in the 'non-Muslim' category. When he asked why the club hadn't been challenged on its discriminatory practices, he'd gotten a growling reply from the manager, an expat American himself, that this was the *American* club and the fact that others were even allowed in had to do with the benevolence of its management [read: him].

Edwards looked up at the map on the wall above his desk...it was a detailed map of the NWFP. Observing it stirred up a lot of emotions and memories. It was, as its name suggested, a wild frontier whose customs and traditions had changed little since Kipling wrote 'Arithmetic on the Frontier.' The Pashtuns, its independent tribesmen, were prone to extremes. They loved fiercely and hated just as passionately. It was a land of contradictions, where the men obsessed over weapons or rose gardens, and often, over both. That is, the ones who could afford such things.

And, of course, there was the memory of Nur...his lovely Nur. Her death and the death of their unborn child took its toll. For years he'd tried to forget by immersing himself in his work. But when asked by name to return to Pakistan to work at the Peshawar Consulate, he couldn't refuse. Edwards was a professional with all the skills and contacts required for another tour of duty.

First posted to Pakistan in 1987 for a two year assignment soon after graduating from the Farm; he returned in 1997, as the Vice-Consul in Peshawar. His tour of duty was extended an extra year and he was scheduled to return to Washington. Given the value of his unidentified source, Jed had made it clear that he had to get the guy to either 'come in' or agree to continue working with Edwards' replacement. The source wouldn't agree to either offer...yet. He'd insisted he would only work with him. It had become personal and the DO didn't like such relationships.

Edwards brooded in the comfy leather chair.

That's what's bugging me. Unlike my agents in the NWFP government and in town, I don't know who the hell he is; yet he seems to know me... got to somehow convince him that this relationship is going to be up one way or the other. Pretty soon his buddies in Al Qaeda are going to be on to him and it won't be a pretty end either. His best bet is to let us bring him in to debrief and then to relocate and protect him and whomever he needs to protect. I've just got to convince him, that's all.

Although the source's information had saved lives, and their embassy, things were not as they seemed: something didn't jive but he couldn't put his finger on it. That bugged him. The whole situation was off somehow.

Wearily he got up and walked to the bathroom adjacent to the study. Like the four other bathrooms in the house, it was a large room with a narrow window with thick reinforced steel bars to keep intruders out. All the windows in the house had steel bars, a common security feature in the more affluent homes of Peshawar. Edwards walked to the sink and turned on the faucet. He looked up in the mirror and noted his reflection: *if I keep this up, I'll look like an Afridi tribesman soon.*

He hadn't shaved since Friday and it showed on his upper lip and chin. With his aquiline nose, brown eyes and hair, he'd passed himself off as a Pashtun tribesman. He was also built like one. Broad shoulders, with a lean muscular build on a six foot frame. But his greatest asset was his native fluency in Pashto thanks to his parents' missionary related charity work in the province when he was a kid.

As he shaved, he thought about Mina. She'd confronted him at the Halloween Party when the drunk DEA agent, Ken Burton, who was horny for her --who wasn't-- blurted out his affiliation with the Agency and some other details. Edwards hadn't been able to maneuver himself out of the situation with a plausible explanation about who he really was or worked for. He refused to confirm or deny what Ken accused him of doing when he was gone for extended periods of time.

Given the upcoming sting operation, he'd been on edge and his demeanor only served to infuriate Mina. She'd demanded an explanation as to whether Ken's charges were true or not. Mina noticed his distance and preoccupation. When he'd quietly left the party early without letting her know, she'd called his cell phone and told him, in a few choice words, that it was over between them.

At the time, Mina's behavior had pissed him off.

What was her fucking problem? Couldn't she wake up and face reality...we are at war with an enemy that wants to destroy our way of life and all she and those other alfalfa eating liberals worry about are the rights of human feces who would chop their heads off in a heartbeat if they didn't agree to conform to their hate filled worldview and code of behavior. These idiots just want to turn the other cheek in the expectation it would elicit a kiss and not a decapitation!

It had been over a week since their public quarrel, or rather since Mina's outburst. He missed her. He missed her smell, her smile, her eyes, the way she walked, even the way she sometimes picked her nose when she read. He hated the fact but couldn't deny it. He hadn't felt so torn up since his parents' deaths in an automobile accident back home in Colorado. Mina somehow managed to get past his barriers and sneak into his heart. When his beloved wife's battered body washed ashore near Attock, Edwards was convinced he'd never love again, not like that at any rate. Nur had been his light. Then, this woman walked into his life: Susan Mina Graham.

Like him, Mina's identity was fluid and also woven into different places. He'd met her at the American Club Halloween party the previous year. She'd arrived dressed as an Afghan princess, which she actually was on her mother's side. Mina wore the loose fitting blue tunic and baggy pants called *shalwar kamiz*, along with a beautiful blue silk head scarf with gold thread needlework. It was her eyes that first caught his attention. They were huge, piercing gray eyes. When their eyes met, she'd held his gaze with a sort of defiance that only added to her appeal. Intrigued by what he saw, he quickly moved towards her and saw the Pashtun in her as he got closer: high cheek bones and strong jaw.

Mina was the daughter of a former American diplomat who'd been posted to Kabul where he met and married her mother in 1968. Her mother was from the Barakzai tribe and related to the exiled Afghan King, Zahir Shah. The marriage was approved because John Graham agreed to convert to Islam in order to marry Zarsanga, Mina's mother. Susan, their first child, was born in Buenos Aires in 1970 while her father was posted there. She'd been called 'Mina' which means 'love' in Pashto, all her life. Idealistic and head strong like her father; Mina worked as a nurse with Afghan refugees.

Edwards quickly discovered that the opinionated Mina was very critical of the American involvement with the *mujahidin's* guerrilla effort in the eighties against the Soviets in a proxy war. What was worse, in her mind, was the fact that her government had supported unsavory characters like Gulbuddin Hikmatyar at the behest of the ISI. Hikmatyar had murdered fellow Afghans who were perceived to be potential rivals. Mina couldn't fathom why Washington financed *mujahidin* who hated everything the United States stood for. Extremists who hated America and would inflict suffering and terror on their own people once the United States left the region.

During their first meeting, she'd ranted and raved, no doubt liberated by the drink in her hand, he'd observed. It was her passion which endeared her to him more than her looks. She was a thoughtful, smart and caring person with a body that he would soon discover was slim but strong.

The fact they'd ended up in bed that night horrified her the next morning. She blamed it on the alcohol consumed the night before. Over breakfast, Edwards truthfully told her that he was the Vice Consul at the U.S. Consulate, but left out a vital detail: this was his diplomatic cover. Later, he would sometimes gaze into her gray eyes and wonder if the day would come when he'd ask her to marry him and then he'd be able to reveal his secret identity.

Just as he finished shaving, the STU rang. Edwards quickly wiped his face with the towel and headed back into the study.

It was Jed.

"Matt."

"Hey, what's up? Any developments?"

"Nope...still waitin' to hear from the Interior Minister. I just got off the phone with Rick. He's gettin' a bit concerned about yar source," Jed sounded almost apologetic.

He liked Jed. He was an operator who, like him, couldn't stomach the bureaucrats. Jed was less concerned about appearances and more focused on getting the mission accomplished. Time would tell if he'd burn out, or be forced out if he failed to comply with whatever political whim was shoved up his ass once he was back again at Langley.

So much for being an independent intelligence gathering organization...that was becoming more and more a myth as the best, most competent, folk who signed on to serve their country, and not to play whore to the politicians in charge, were forced out. Like Jed, he'd learned that the party in power in Washington always acted as though they were entitled to use the CIA to fulfill their own political agenda rather than let the Agency determine what its focus, as an arm of the National Security apparatus, should be.

"What's Rick worried about *now*?" asked Edwards, although he guessed where this was headed.

"Well, he's worried we'll lose COWBOY...thinks ya need to bring him in before it's too late," Jed said in his slow drawl.

"You think I haven't thought his time might be up with this big a leak?"

"I know we've covered this ground before. It's not an enviable situation but..."

"But *what*...what do you suggest I do, Jed?"

"Ya've gotta convey to him that he's in a whole lot of danger... of being exposed, that we're willin' to offer him and his family members, if he has any, new identities and a new life. In return, he's to agree to an extensive debrief on Al Qaeda and whatever else he knows, the whole nine yards."

"Well, I've no way to make contact...balls always been in his court. None. Never liked these ROEs but hell you and then Rick insisted I play along even if COWBOY's unorthodox *modus operandi* violates Agency rules."

"I know, I know...but ya've gotta reach him ASAP and git our offer to him."

He recognized the urgency in Jed's tone.

"And... if he doesn't accept, then what?"

"Then communicate to him that we'll terminate this arrangement right now and leave his sorry ass to deal with the Al Qaeda thugs."

"Doubt that'll rattle his chain...he knows that I'm due to return stateside at the end of next month as I warned him in my note left with his last payoff. He probably knows his time may soon be up. There aren't too many secrets in this town Jed," said Edwards with bitterness as he thought of Mina.

"Ya did broach the idea of him continuing to work for us through Jeff?" Jed asked.

"Yeah, in my note. But given his paranoia and mostly one way communication, I doubt he's going to take the bait. I'll try to make contact and get our concerns across. No promises though."

"Just hope someone from the Pak side doesn't disclose the details of the embassy attack to the media. We've made this concern quite clear to them. The last thing we need is publicity."

"ISI probably won't leak the story to the media, especially since they received their tip from us. It would embarrass Mustafa's government. But these things rarely remain secret. Paid the right sum by a media network certainly does loosen lips. What worries me is if Al Qaeda's ISI informants get wind of our role in providing the info. Would place COWBOY at risk if they realize it was through a leak and not from any surveillance methods that the Paks found out."

"Yeah, that's a worry. Plus ISI has a lot of connections to Al Qaeda," said Jed. He continued: "...that's why Rick and I think it's time to bring COWBOY in."

"I *got* the point Jed," Edwards replied. "I just gotta figure out the logistics of making an offer that he won't refuse."

"Thanks Matt. I know ya're scheduled to leave just before the New Year and there ain't much time left. Ya've got to try to make contact."

"I'll do my best...now I've got to get to the consulate."

"Again, thanks for a job well done."

"Sure. I'll be in touch later today to see if you've heard anything from the Paks."

"OK," Jed said.

When he hung up the STU, the house phone rang. He picked up the receiver and Ali Muhammad the cook cum *bearer* in a cloyingly polite voice said: “*Sahib*, your breakfast is getting cold and you will be late for work today if you don’t hurry up and come to the dining room.”

Edwards laughed. “Ali Muhammad, you worry too much. I’ll be right out.”

Then he carefully closed the door of his government issued study bureau which contained the STU and locked it. It was against regulations to leave the STU in full view when not in use. He walked towards the study’s heavy, sound proof reinforced steel door with a dark brown wood veneer. After he locked the one ‘secure’ room required in all American diplomats’ homes in Pakistan, Edwards made his way across the spacious hall towards the dining room with its large teak dining table surrounded by twelve chairs. As he did so, he pocketed his key chain in his shirt’s front pocket.

Ali Muhammad appeared through the kitchen door and said in his Kashmiri accented English: “Sir, you are getting velly late for work *sahib*.”

“I know Ali. It’s not like me to be late for work, is it?” Edwards responded with a grin on his face.

“No, no *sahib*, you must hurry and have your breakfast. It is getting velly cold on the table, you must eat quickly,” asked Ali. “Or does the *sahib* not want any breakfast, only coffee?” the man continued.

“I’ll skip breakfast today. I’ll take an apple and a cup of your coffee and hit the road.”

Edwards noticed Ali Muhammad’s excitement about his breakfast routine.

Probably wants me out of the house so he can resume his obsessive cleaning and dusting regimen.

His few guests had commented on how clean and tidy the place was. This was no remarkable feat in a city known for its all enveloping dust. There was no crevice or locale that wasn’t dusty. Yet Ali Muhammad’s ongoing war with the menace seemed to be a successful one judging from the compliments received. Not a lick of dust to be seen anywhere within the confines of his fortress.

Ali Muhammad was his 42 year old Kashmiri *bearer*. A *bearer* was the equivalent of a butler here and was a term left over from the time of British colonial rule. In addition to Ali Muhammad, the household included a gardener or *mali*; a *jamadar*, who came to sweep, vacuum and clean the bathrooms; a *dhobi*, who did the laundry and miscellaneous tasks and four *chowkidars* or guards at any given time.

To Ali Muhammad’s irritation, his boss had also hired an Afghan refugee out of his own pocket, as the *mali*’s —Yahya Khan’s— assistant to help out in the garden. Ali Muhammad and the entire household staff were ‘local hires.’ As the term implied, they were some of the thousands of Pakistani nationals who worked for the U.S. government in various support capacities. Most were hired to work at the Embassy or one of the three U.S. Consulates, the American Cultural Centers or at U.S.A.I.D. buildings or projects. Others were hired to work in the homes of Americans who were affiliated with their government, primarily as employees of the State Department. A job with the Americans was coveted given the generous salaries and benefits by local standards. Ali Muhammad had worked in the homes of various American diplomats. Considered reliable, trustworthy and hardworking, he was assigned to work in Peshawar as the *bearer* for the Vice-Consul. Ali Muhammad was given the impression that the Vice-Consul was a regular State Department diplomat. He’d worked for the Vice-Consul in Peshawar for six years and had received excellent end of tour reviews from Edwards’ predecessors.

As the *bearer*, Ali Muhammad was in charge of supervising the household staff, with the exception of the four rotating *chowkidars* who reported directly to DSS at the American Consulate. Ali Muhammad was a hard task master: verbal lashings were the norm. He’d taken a particular dislike to the 19 year old Afghan refugee —Abdul Karim—who responded to Ali Muhammad’s verbal insults with his big toothless grin.

It was this toothless grin that caught Edwards’ attention. Abdul Karim stood outside the U.S. Consulate building on Hospital Road in the Peshawar Cantonment and offered to clean windshields in return for some rupees. He’d been the most persistent of the beggars. Whenever Edwards’ drove out of the consulate’s gate, Abdul Karim would rush forward and plead in Pashto to be allowed to clean his windshield. But, unlike the other beggars, he didn’t want *baksheesh* or alms, but begged to be allowed to earn some rupees by cleaning Edwards’ car or doing other chores. The young man walked with a limp,

seemed half starved and malnourished which made him look much younger than his years. But, like most Afghans, he sought no sympathy.

One day Edwards' struck up a conversation with him. Abdul Karim's village was in Afghanistan's Logar Province's Khushi District where his family had cultivated vegetables and had a fruit orchard. That was before the Soviets came and killed his entire family and destroyed everything. Only Abdul Karim survived the bombs. Edwards offered to buy him a meal at a nearby *chaikhana* and in doing so struck up a friendship with him. The young man was desperate for a job. Edwards' spoke to his *mali*, Yahya Khan, himself a Pashtun refugee from Paktia, about a possible job for Abdul Karim as the gardener's assistant. Yahya liked the deal: he could give the young man all the back breaking work of pruning the hedges, trees and other shrubs, and mowing the large lawn in the front of the house.

Ali Muhammad, on the other hand, was furious and didn't hide his sentiments. "*Sahib*, how I do my job when you go and bring in Afghan beggars off street?"

Edwards tried to sound reassuring. "You don't have to worry about him. Yahya Khan has promised to take him under his wing and supervise his work so he won't be a worry for you."

"*No, no sahib*, you don't understand...the boy will be nothing but trouble. He is a street urchin and *Allah* only knows what he's been up to and he will try to rob you, *sahib*. This I know velly well, yes *sahib*," said Ali Muhammad excitedly.

Edwards had smiled and patted Ali Muhammad on the shoulder: "He'll be fine. He's a good kid. Abdul Karim has promised me that he'll go to literacy classes at CARE in the evenings and do yard work in the mornings. I've also told him he can use one of our extra *charpoy*s and leave it on the front veranda where he can sleep at night. That way he'll be safe and can do his job well. Don't you agree, Ali Muhammad?"

Ali Muhammad couldn't believe his ears. Had the *sahib* gone mad? *No*, he thought, *all these Americans were the same: softhearted and generous in ways that a local would never be. They didn't realize how easily their generosity was taken advantage of.* The British, he'd heard from their bearers, on the other hand, were far more familiar with the harsh realities of the place; while these naïve Americans were trying to make friends with everyone! *That will be their undoing*, he'd thought bitterly to himself.

Edwards didn't mind having Abdul Karim sleep on the front veranda with its beautiful marble floor. Although out in the open, it had a ceiling which shielded him from the rain. It beat the alternative: sleeping in a ditch somewhere using his wool *patou* as a blanket. Other American diplomats might not have agreed to such an arrangement —especially those with wives—given that the bed —the ubiquitous *charpoy* made with jute twine— was an eyesore especially when it was placed on the veranda by the front entrance to the house. Edwards could care less. He thought it gave his place some character and the three small servants' quarters —as they were called here—were all taken by Ali Muhammad, Yahya Khan and Ahmed, the *dhobi* shared the second; while the third was for the *chowkidars* to trade off on since three had to stand duty at the security post in front of Edwards' blast resistant twelve foot high metal gate. Given these logistics, Edwards decided the veranda would serve as Abdul Karim's sleeping accommodations. Abdul Karim was only too happy to move in and looked at his 'room' as one large beautiful safe garden that was surrounded by twelve foot high walls on all sides except for the six foot wall which separated the *sahib's* house from the American club.

Edwards thanked Ali Muhammad as he grabbed the hot cup of coffee and the apple which probably was from the famed apple orchards of Swat, Gilgit or Hunza.

I'm getting late... but it's been a long night. He pressed a button on his cell phone.

"Hey Josh, it's me. I'm about to head out."

"You're late."

Josh was the other CIA case officer assigned to the Peshawar Consulate as the Political Officer. At 27, Josh was on his second overseas tour since he'd joined the DO. Edwards was fond of him and they'd done some treks together in the Hunza Valley. "On my way, see you in 20 or so."

“Yeah, boss.”

* * *

As Edwards stepped out onto the veranda, he found Abdul Karim sitting up on his *charpoy*, which was located at the other end of the veranda near the driveway. The expression on his face suggested deep anxiety, a look he hadn't seen before on Abdul Karim's face.

Abdul Karim, as usual, spoke to him in Pashto: “Maaatews *sahib*, Maaatews *sahib*,” he said. He limped towards Edwards with a desperate look on his face as he waved an envelope in the air. “*Maatews sahib, I have something for you*,” yelled Abdul Karim excitedly.

“What's up? What do you have for me?” Edwards replied in Pashto.

“This envelope...I was given this last night as I was on my way here from my school class. A man, whose face I couldn't see because he had a big *chador* wrapped around himself, grabbed my arm to stop me,” said Abdul Karim with a big grin spreading on his face.

Whenever Abdul Karim was scared or nervous or happy, he always grinned. He couldn't control it as much as he tried. It made others angry, especially when it was a situation where people were cursing or hitting him. Then he would grin even more through the pain.

“He grabbed my arm as I was turning into Circular Road. This man gave me this envelope and told me to deliver it to you only this morning when you came out to go to work. The man gave me 500 rupees to take this envelope to you. Said if I don't do right way, you die and I die,” said Abdul Karim as he ran an imaginary *khanjar* across his neck with his right hand. He grinned from ear to ear as he nervously recalled the events of the previous night.

“Did the man speak to you in Pashto or Urdu?” asked Edwards quietly as he tried to calm Abdul Karim down using a soft tone and inflection as he seemed to be on the edge of hysteria now that he'd unloaded his secret.

“Pashto *sahib*,” Abdul Karim grinned, “...but he wasn't one of us.”

“How so?”

“He spoke like an outsider...different. Not like a Yusufzai, not like an Afridi, or a Mahsud or a Wazir. No, no. I think he's not one of us but he speaks our tongue.”

“Are you saying he's like me?” asked Edwards.

“A *feringhi*? No, no,” Abdul Karim interrupted. “I think he was a foreigner, but not a *feringhi*, he was different, walked different.”

He knew what Abdul Karim meant and asked: “He was a *Muslim* foreigner...like a...” Edwards waited for Abdul Karim to fill in the blank.

“Yes, a *Muslim*,” Abdul Karim tossed out the words afraid he was in some sort of trouble or that the *sahib* was angry. He adored Edwards and didn't want to upset him in any way, which was why he worked hard at the night school the *sahib* had paid for so he could repay his kindness to him one day as his Pashtun honor dictated.

Edwards carefully examined the unaddressed plain white envelope as he tore it open. Inside was a sheet of paper. As he read the message, he felt that familiar surge of adrenaline and excitement: *it was from COWBOY*.

DO NOT GO TO THE CONSULATE...RIGHT NOW GO STRAIGHT TO QK. WILL BE IN CONTACT. URGENT. MUST GO NOW. WAIT THERE.

Edwards' heart raced. QK was COWBOY's emergency safe house location. Was this it? COWBOY was coming in from the shadows.

“Did he sound like he was a Tajik from Kabul or from somewhere else in Afghanistan, like say a Kandahari, or a Pakistani from the Punjab?”

“Nooo, Maaatew *Sahib*. He's not a Pakistani or an Afghan. Foreign.”

“Did you get a good look at him?”

“Noo, *sahib*...it was late. I was walking from the bus stop on Arbab Road as I do every night after class and its dark when I get back at around ten.”

“Where do *you* think he was from?” Edwards gently asked.

“I...I think, I think he was one of *them* ...the...the... *Afghan Arabs*,” Abdul Karim exclaimed as the grin stretched wide across his face.

“How can you be sure?” was the gentle, yet probing, question from Edwards.

“I used to beg outside the Saudi Red Crescent on Chinar Street and this man, this man sounded like... he talked like one of them but I’m not 100% sure. I swear upon my father’s grave that he wasn’t an Afghan, not a Pashtun nor Tajik nor Uzbek. Not even a Hazara,” replied Abdul Karim, now convinced he was somehow being useful as evident from the barrage of questions from the *sahib*.

“Why didn’t you give it to me last night?”

“*Sahib*, I didn’t want to disturb you and the man told me that if I gave it to anyone, even you, before the proper time this morning, both of us would be hurt. Here is the 500 rupees he gave me. I can’t keep it. I must have done wrong, you are angry *sahib*. I’m sorry *sahib*.”

“*Stop it Abdul!* I’m *not* angry at you. I’m angry at the man who threatened us last night,” Edwards said raising his voice now.

“You were under pressure...so you handled the situation the best way you thought you should. It’s okay. And, thank you for the envelope.”

Abdul Karim’s grin was one of relief, not fear, now.

“The 500 rupees is yours to keep.”

“Are you sure *sahib*?”

“Sure. You told the truth about the whole incident including the money and that’s what I expect from an honorable Pashtun like you, the truth,” said Edwards trying to boost his fragile ego.

“Thank you *sahib*. You are a good man. May *Allah* bless you always,” said Abdul Karim delighted to put the rupees back into his *kamiz*’s pocket.

“Abdul Karim?”

“Yes?”

“In the future, if someone approaches you like that or threatens you in any way, come straight to me. I won’t let anyone hurt you. You are safe with me. You must keep this just between the two of us. Okay?”

“Thank you *Maatews sahib*,” said Abdul Karim with his big toothless, but endearing, grin.

“See you later.”

Edwards stared at the note in his hand for a second. He turned and walked back into the house.

It was *him*: COWBOY. *What was up?* This was not their usual SOP. This whole situation disturbed him from the beginning.

This guy controls me and not the other way around. Well, I can’t ignore this but I’m damned if I’m going to go into an ambush.

Back in the house, he unlocked the door to his study as Ali Muhammad rushed into the hall from the kitchen.

“Everything ok sir?” asked Ali Muhammad sounding concerned.

“Yes. I just forgot something that’s all. You can go back to whatever you were doing in the kitchen.”

“Fine sir. I go back to kitchen. Lots of work for me,” said the *bearer* as he turned and went back into the kitchen.”

Inside his locked study, Edwards punched in the password on the built-in wall safe hidden behind the large picture of the Khyber Pass. He cogitated over how he planned to deal with the unfolding situation as he took out the .357 Sig Sauer P226 pistol and made sure it was loaded with hollow point bullets. Then he grabbed a box of additional ammunition, three loaded magazines and a wad of twenty dollar bills before closing the safe.

As he stepped out onto the veranda again, Abdul Karim saluted him with a big grin on his face. Edwards waved as he quickly started the engine to reverse the black Suburban out of the long concrete

driveway. The *chowkidars* —used to his schedule and his one honk—moved to unlock the bullet proof gate. They saluted him as was their habit. He waited till they were in full view of his windshield. Then he waved.

The adrenaline surged through his tense body. Something was up and whatever it was, it wasn't good. Instinct told him there was trouble ahead. He pressed a button on his car's built-in satellite phone system and told Josh he had to make a detour to QK. He informed him his GPS was on and to track the vehicle in case there was trouble. He would park at the usual secure location where he'd switch vehicles.

Qissa Khawani Bazaar —the bazaar of story tellers—was located in *Andar Shehr*, the oldest part of Peshawar, which dated as far back as two millennium. Peshawar's old city was one of his favorite destinations because it was an exotic, intrigue filled place where little had changed over the centuries. It was a forbidding place. The few westerners who ventured there these days were, more often than not, drug addicts that stayed in the sleazy cheap hotels which littered the old city.

Ali Muhammad watched him leave from behind the dining room curtains. He quickly located the cell phone, whose existence Edwards was not aware of. It was kept hidden in the large kitchen pantry under bags of various legumes and spices that were purchased at the Saddar Bazaar solely for the needs of the household staff.

Ali Muhammad dialed the memorized number for the first time and said: "He is on his way."
Click.

