

# 1

## *Las Vegas, Nevada...in the near future.*

Sin City hadn't changed much since Lincoln Boddies' last visitation. For what he desired right now in his life, that suited him just fine. Well, not just him alone but his compatriots as well. Accent on the word, patriot. That's what he was and that's what he'd always be. A defender of the home of the brave and the land of the free. Accent on the word, free. What was the most important aspect of the word free for him? Free from tyranny and terror. In particular, free from the forces of terrorism. All of the world's renowned groups applied. But one in particular that etched its horrific acts of brutality in his mind, across the globe and moreover, has supplanted, 'The Base' or al-Qaeda, as the world's leading terroristic threat. ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham. They hadn't hit America yet, but he knew and the U.S. Government knew they planned to do just that soon. He took it personal and so had his colleagues. He'll never forget 9/11. He hoped America would never forget it so as not to allow it to happen again. Accent on another word. Forget. As he sat at the desk of Room 415 at The Sands Casino & Hotel in downtown Las Vegas, he reflected on what he desired at this moment. That's what he was in Vegas to do. Forget the battle between good and evil just for a shortened period. That's all he wanted. That's all he needed.

Lincoln Boddies was a thirty-three-year old, brown-skinned, African-American man who carried a solid one hundred and ninety-five pounds with no more than ten percent body fat on his six-foot frame. Even with loose fit clothes, his rugged physique stood out with near twenty-inch biceps and triceps, thick as two by four forearms and

the accompanied vascularity to match. His chest cut a wide, fully developed girth from the outer and lower pectoral muscles to his inner and upper development. His trapezius muscles that bordered his shortened, bulky and near no-neck status resembled craggy mountains. In short, he knew he was a man no one in his or her right mind wanted any part of in light of what his physical package hadn't revealed. A special few in his inner circle knew the whole Lincoln David Boddies story. To those select few who dared tried him in his line of work, that story might cost them their lives.

Lincoln dressed in a red, short-sleeved Polo shirt, blue jeans and new-fangled maroon, gold, and black 'King James' sneakers, aka *NBA Cleveland Cavaliers* superstar LeBron James, on his feet. A little much needed down time from his career's flurry of activity he deemed non-stop with good reason. However, he wasn't all about that right now. His laptop computer rested on the desk's surfaces and hooked up to a Skype feed with the camera atop the monitor. He smiled as he viewed an exquisite, black woman he knew was twenty-eight years of age—he also knew not to ask a woman's age, but his debonair ways ran circles, squares, triangles and rectangles around that old maxim. He smiled more at her when he thought upon the education he received from Glenda Hopkins the owner of *MagniFeet, Curls & Weaves Studios* back home in Phoenix, the other stylists, customers and of course, this Eighth Wonder of the World that was his wife, Candace Marie. At present, she styled a 'Queenly Updo' with the ponytail off to the right shoulder and the tresses parted to the left side. He praised God many a day for her hair, real from the root to the crown to the ends. That rare fact and truth saved this brother

many dollar bills at the *MagniFeet...Studios*. Oh, baby, baby, so elegant and so beautiful no matter what she wore or had done. Yeah, to think on that word baby, that was one of the reasons he contacted her aside from, when possible, he kept in touch with her, as a respectful amorous husband should.

“I wish I were there with you,” he said. “But, work calls oh, 365/24/7 anywhere, anytime, anyplace, anyhow.”

“Don’t I know this. You still on track to come home later this week then?”

He shrugged, “Hopefully...like tomorrow.”

Lincoln thought of Christmas and the Fourth of July when he viewed Candace’s face.

“Tomorrow? Tomorrow baby, really?”

“If nothing pops up on the radar screen sort to speak even if the crew decides to stay over, I’m taking an early morning flight at seven to be by your side and to laugh when you try to get up off the sofa, chair, and some other unmentionables.”

“You know you can stay right where you are Mr. Man, okay?”

His smile caused her to mock laughter at him. Her pearl whites sparkled from Charlotte, North Carolina through the Skype connection to the laptop. Married for two years now, she wanted children sooner than he did. Not by much though. He wanted to wait after two to two and a half years; he granted her wish just under the year and a half mark. As long as Junior was healthy, man he had no complaints about the manifestation. In fact, the more the day approached, the more excited he became and that suited her excitement just fine and dandy too. And don’t get him started with Uncle Rico’s enthusiasm for his nephew. He

called his sister more than this father-in-waiting had. He conceived an image of what she described a moment ago about her as she powered up off various support apparatuses.

“I’ll tell you this though. The fifth month into this first pregnancy and I’m ready for this boy to audition on *American Idol* or *Sunday Best* instead of *Dancing With The Stars* or *So You Think You Can Dance*. Have mercy, Jesus.”

“Yeah, my boy handles his business, baby. That’s all that is. The next Ultimate Fighting Champion or Mixed Martial Arts title holder. Yeah! Now, that’s my boy, Lincoln, Jr.”

“Yes, that’s your boy and that’s Uncle Rico’s nephew. I’m sure he’d love it if LJ were the future Rampage Jackson.”

Lincoln shook his head, “No, no, Uncle Rico would be ecstatic if LJ cut his likeness in the mold of Miami Hurricanes like Ray Lewis, Frank Gore or Michael Irvin.”

They shared more laughter when he thought upon their conversations about what were his or their expectations for their son. He and Candace talked at length about Lincoln Daniel Boddies, Jr.’s future. He was sure—well he scratched that, he wasn’t sure if he wanted Junior to walk his honorable career path. They thought of so many instances of children who walked the same paths of their parents to the detriment and the benefit of themselves, family and society. Sports demarcated as the prime example. The whole football and kickboxing thing? Neither of them wanted to get in the way of whatever Lincoln, Jr.’s call in life was though that’s another area they turned over to God Almighty. Their bottom line as parents was the same as any parent in the world, for the most part anyway and that was

to adhere to the laws and regulations of society. That's all. He giggled in mild jest when he thought upon he and Candace in total agreement that Junior better not had brought home any babies before their time either.

From nowhere some hidden disturbance in the hallway broke up their interaction and his contemplation. He whipped his head around to the source and that alerted Candace of course.

“Hold on a second, Candy.”

“Okay.”

He took a few steps to the door and checked the peephole. A man and a woman argued a moment, then fast walked down the hall with suitcases in tow and disappeared. Though the pair vanished, Lincoln remained stationary at the door. His faced etched in recollections.

“Is everything all right, honey?”

He returned to his seat at the desk to view a concerned Candace. Now, another not so pleasant thought occurred to him and he knew Candace's rebuke followed soon afterward. He exhaled before he continued.

“You hear or get any word at your parents' house or from my parents in Chicago or maybe even a phone call from Franklin or Demetria—”

He observed her countenance as it mixed a combination of sorrow and courage as she addressed him.

“Lincoln, Lincoln, Lincoln—”

“About a Death Notification visitation—”

“Lincoln, your brother and sister haven't called or wrote a letter or sent an e-mail from Memphis or Chicago, okay? Didn't we say we'd trust God and leave that situation in His more than capable hands? Huh? Didn't we say we would?”

He nodded. “We did so many times over that neither of us can remember, babe.”

“Okay, so we leave it at that and trust Him. Can we agree again to do that?”

He exhaled with his spirit, soul and body in sudden heaviness. He nodded again.

“It’s been a long time, baby. Too long of a time in fact you know this.”

“But that’s the nature of your business, Lincoln. He understands and understood that as you do and did. Like I do and did too. Like the rest of our families do and did as well.” She paused, then, “What brought that on from nowhere anyway?”

“Just been a long time since we heard from him that’s all. I miss Julius, Candy. I miss my baby brother. Hey, I had better check what manner of entanglement the guys are up to about now. They might not have any money for meals the rest of our stay. I love you and call me if you need me for anything your dad and mom and the others can’t provide.”

“I know that. You go and experience all the fun that is Las Vegas with the crew. But no showgirl performances I’m fine here. I love you and see you soon.”

He chuckled a little before he answered. “I love you too. Bye, babe.”

“Bye, bye.”

She ended the transmission with a smile for him. He ended his time in the hotel room with a clearer picture of what gave him pause on the other side of the door.

## 2

A quick check of his Croton watch confirmed his estimation of time: 21:00 PST. Lincoln caught sight of a bank of about six televisions mounted to the ceiling above the glitz and glitter of The Sands Casino nightlife bar setup. Patrons packed the stools that formed a 'U' shaped configuration about the partially black leather covered middle and base areas. The wooden surface on which a few bartenders, the women in particular, which mesmerized the glances of his comrades once more, served a variety of expensive drinks to a packed seated patronage in their casino best to fun-in-the-Vegas-sun short sleeve shirts, shorts and flip-flops or sneakers. His attention arrested, Goldstein and Troy mimicked him.

“What’s up? WWE Raw matches in dress, suit, shirt, and tie?” Goldstein asked.

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to find out now,” Lincoln said.

On a pair of the TVs, three persons, two men and a woman shared heated exchanges. The moderator and host of the news magazine, *In The Crosshairs*, per the graphics on the TV screen, was a Charles Queensberry. He sat to the left by himself in a tweed jacket that seemed nice, but Lincoln figured the man questioned if he was ‘Sure’ or not with those hot stage lights he knew shined upon him. The two unknown guests to him at least sat on the right. But what generated this hot and bothered spectacle that engaged the customers’ attention?

“But the Boston Marathon terror attack via a pair of everyday pressure cookers by two brothers influenced by Islam or who identified with Islam was a homegrown

terrorist issue. In light of that the question is, does our government need to focus more on homegrown terrorism and not as much on the international terrorism as our forces withdraw from the Middle East, first and foremost Iraq and Afghanistan?” Queensberry asked.

“Humph, might make the job a little easier if the government did just that, huh?” Goldstein asked.

“Might. But no matter what Washington’s objective is now, the job will always be in demand until that sweet by-and-by reigns on earth,” Lincoln said. “You do like to get a paycheck every now and again, right?”

“I can think of no other one more important than ours.”

Lincoln patted Goldstein’s back, nodded and concentrated again on the televisions.

He thought upon one Joseph Elijah Goldstein as he salivated over the short skirted, low-cut neckline dresses of women who likewise displayed their wares for those whose chances bordered upon slim, those that lived on fantasy island or none. Goldstein, as he called him, knew better. He had unfinished business at home. Every time he viewed him or better said when he broached the topic of marital relationships, he reflected upon his marriage to Candace. At some point, he wondered if he would place his career over her and their son. Would any justification stand its ground for such a switched priority of life balances? He didn’t want it all, but he did want what he wanted in its proper perspective. His pastor said on many occasions that divine order was a pre-requisite for miracles and any marriages that lasted more than a handful of years he deemed those unions the result of the wonder-working, miracle power from God. To him, it hadn’t mattered whether the husband and wife were Christians or not. God



said that marriage was honorable unto all. He hadn't heard Goldstein declare such, but his crumbled marriage hurt him not to mention his babies. That old adage that "actions spoke louder than words" sealed that deal for his decision. Man, the same thing happening to him and Candace kept him up at night. The ultimate doomsday scenario? Lincoln David Boddies might not come home at all and a failed marriage had nothing to do with that.

Some other conversations continued amongst the panel guests and the host on the topic.

"So, if we can stop the drug trafficking, in particular, opium, and say the illegal arms dealing on the open black market, say anything associated with nuclear weapons, we can shut down terrorism forever. Point being, those that practice evil will always find a way to practice evil," Goldstein said.

"Such is the duality of man. Within every human heart is the capacity for good and for evil. With the help of those unseen evil spiritual forces, I'd say humanity rates an 'A+' in its depravity to debase one another," Lincoln said. "But like Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.""

Goldstein chuckled before he said, "Or for good men not to fire their weapons at said evil."

Lincoln smirked, "Touché."

Then the same woman Lincoln glimpsed in the hallway from his hotel room appeared. She stood and looked about at nothing in particular.

"I fear the day will arrive soon when Americans will follow the lead of my beloved Israeli brothers and sisters and don gas masks every other day. That's why my career's

my true love. It better be yours or Americans will wear gas masks like Israelis—”

Now Troy floated away from one of the forms of entertainment the casino’s patrons chose to lose their money to the house to and entered the conversation.

“Hey Nostradamus, a little positive thinkin’ will do the disposition of your fellow brothers good,” Troy said.

“And that’s not gonna happen on my watch,” Lincoln added. “Nope, I reject that. I won’t lose my family to a career or my country to terrorism. Those are your negative thoughts, Joe. Change them. Change them before they become a way of permanent thinking.”

“If you don’t want to be real, that’s on you two I say with respect. That’s just how the world’s gone now. They,” he pointed at the screen, “and they,” he pointed in a three hundred and sixty-degree manner around the casino, “have to deal with that reality too. Like it or not.”

“Not,” Troy said.

Goldstein waved his hand to dismiss Troy. The two of them were indeed close, but Goldstein couldn’t beat his closeness with Troy. He fell and grew in love with his sister, Candace, over the past three years. Therefore, Sergeant First Class Ricardo ‘Rico’ Michael Troy became family after he proposed to his sister two years ago. He thanked God she accepted on the first try because he wasn’t sure if he had the courage to face that level of rejection again. Today, they shared wedded bliss for those last twenty-four months. It wasn’t so long ago that he found out fatherhood loomed for him and uncle status for Troy. He knew when informed of Candace’s pregnancy, he followed Goldstein’s lead when he named his son after himself: Lincoln, Jr. Some night’s sleep eluded him as he deliberated what kind of boy

he grew into and how that result reflected what kind of morals and values he, Candace, their families, of course, that included Troy, instilled in his upbringing. Yeah, the big man, who could play for the Miami Dolphins back home was a freak of physical nature: Six-foot three and two hundred and fifty to sixty pounds of raw, bone-crushing muscle mass. He delighted in the fact that Uncle Troy played for his team though the boy showed other 'freak' characteristics when odd circumstances presented themselves. However, those circumstances were rare indeed.

Just four years older than Troy's twenty-nine, his very single brother-in-law showed no signs of slowed pursuits of the opposite sex. He rah-rah, shish koom ba with Goldstein for their attempts at serial monogamy, but he still played the field, the grandstand, the parking lot, the concession stand, and the team bus or plane. But he kept his faith in God on a short leash. Not one to stray too far from the source of truth, he stayed within the boundaries of the Word of God. That made some of his fellow patriots howl in laughter when he ogled a beautiful woman and those holy restrictions pricked his conscience. That's why the man grew to behemoth proportions through bodybuilding. Cold showers failed a long time ago. He imagined Troy thanked God for the options available to him. However, simultaneously, he knew his brother-in-law neared the time when he desired to settle down and start his own family. He, like all men and women who accepted the challenge of the marital plunge, wanted to make sure they did so with the best possible covenant partner. Sorry to say for Troy, his brother-in-law's parents hadn't produced an available sister on his family tree. The truth that resided

within him was certain he wouldn't have given a sister the recommendation to Troy anyway. Goldstein wasn't the lone horn dog between the pair.

As the duo continued, Lincoln slyly concentrated on the woman with more measured scrutiny. She dressed appropriately enough he supposed with a medium heavy brown leather jacket, it sometimes got cool from the mountain air at night. It seemed to him she wore a Vegas t-shirt, typical tourist attire, loose fitted white khakis and zipped brown leather boots. None of that seemed out of place to him. He faced the facts that total relaxation eluded him despite the festive mood and the casino décor. He reminded himself in addition that with a new bride and a first baby on the way, his testosterone could kick into overdrive like Candace's estrogen. But, something...Then 'Uncle' Troy busted him.

"What? What?"

"You married my sister and you already peepin' at the now unavailables? You're my superior officer, but we're off duty now. Your tongue had better stand down—"

"Chill, chill, Troy. I love your sister more than I love you, especially at this moment after a dumb statement or better said assumption like that."

"You know, he's right, Troy. His tongue, your tongue, my tongue are all standin' down. But another part of me at least is standin' up. Ten-hut! Forward march—"

Lincoln watched the horn dog as he eased his way to the woman. Troy seized him by the arm and explained the finer points of who between the two of them had the upper hand.

"Look at the size of my shoe. Eighteen, baby. You ain't even in the runnin'. You still at the startin' tape waitin' for

the gun to go off. Oh by the way, they have treatment for those whose guns go off prematurely you know and it ain't that little blue pill."

"The Incredible Bulk's got jokes now? Check the profile, brother. Dark hair, a touch of the olive skin like the sweet, succulent and supple pomegranate."

"You need to get your eyes checked, Goldstein. Those are casaba melons. You're gonna need more firin' practice at the range too dude. Just let me know when you'll be there so I'm not."

"You've got selective hearin', that it, Troy?"

Lincoln laughed despite himself and the fuzzy memories this woman triggered in his brain.

"Will you both cease and desist, please, just for a few seconds." At last, he arrested their undivided. "On the sneak tip, doesn't she look familiar?"

The pair played their surveillance off with random glances in every direction as if they'd never been to Las Vegas before, which was the truth. The woman paced a few feet left and then right as if she waited and watched for something or someone.

"Nothing registers here, brother-in-law."

"I still say she's my type, but other than that, I'm shootin' blanks."

Troy chuckled. "Now, that little blue pill could help you with that one, Joe Go'. Maybe the scientists at Jurassic World or, or, hey, remember the Six Million Dollar Man, huh? "We can rebuild him. Better, stronger, faster. Da-da-da-da-a..." Remember?"

"Sure, sure. Around the turn of the 20th century, Ric, Ric. On the other hand, maybe it was when Columbus

discovered America. Betcha you were around for that too huh?”

Lincoln watched them in mocked laughter at one another. He made a decision right there that these two would never see the light of day or a casino night in Las Vegas again. At least not with him. He laughed some himself until his memory fully engaged the recollections of this woman. Now, nothing was funny. Nothing was funny at all anymore. He made that crystal clear to them. Vacation ended.

“Stand down now both of you. Subtle distraction.”

The command of his voice and stern look vanquished their frivolity. He grappled with his cell phone in his front pants pocket. He watched them as they pointed to the ceiling and entrance. The woman spied them with brief eye contact. Then a millisecond before she looked away, he snapped her picture with the cellie.

“At ease.”

“Lincoln, we meant no disrespect to you or women or your religion—”

His hand waved off Goldstein’s apology. “It’s not any of that, guys.” He speed dialed and waited. Then he heard her.

“Slater.”

“I need facial recognition and background. Sending pic’ now.”

Lincoln proceeded with the delivery. Oh, how he hoped and prayed he was right and wrong.

### 3

While he waited, Lincoln dug out his wallet in a front pants pocket. Besides over two thousand dollars in cash, he pulled out an old, small photograph of the same woman who stood before them. Though he knew what he wrote on the back of the photograph, he flipped it over nonetheless. He viewed his own handwritten remarks from a couple of years ago amidst a covert mission into the hot zones of Afghanistan and Iraq. He read the caption to himself, 'Last lead to Julius?'

So lost in thought of the recent past, he lost sight of the dawned fact that Troy and Goldstein studied what he studied and read what he read and he recognized full engagement when he saw it. Vacation was indeed over. They were all business and all business in this context wasn't a good thing for this not much of a mystery woman now. The pair continued to play it cool with the subtle surveillance. However, his cool for the information to come evaporated. He clocked the aisles of the casino with suckers on his left and right, front and behind, who lost money hand over fist, fingers, hands and the rest of the arm complex. Roulette wheels for Blackjack fanatics, crap tables with the 'pit bosses' who tried to hide their sneers at the surefire losers that paid for his salary and other hotel and casino perks. A variety of poker table games from Four-Card to Seven Card to Caribbean Stud to the famous Texas Hold 'Em. Then there were the favorite slot machines, which only made him think of a healthy diet: Lemons, cherries, plums, oranges, watermelons, grapes and pineapples with all the literal bells and figurative whistles intact.

“Slater.”

“Laptop is slow in the requests, sir. Okay, here we go...Here we go...Background info’s slow in comin’, sir...”

However, to each his own as he heard it and that brought his compatriots front and center. They spent their government wages however they wanted. It made no difference to him. In fact, he suggested this time away in Las Vegas. They blew off steam by blowin’ off their wallets and purses depth of denominational quantity. He blew off steam as he laughed and teased them with words of biblical wisdom on the foolishness of vanity games. The sound advice, whether accepted or rejected, didn’t change his opinion of them. They were a brotherhood. He loved them and they loved him.

“Oh, okay...”

“What is it?”

“Not what, but who. Just your average, everyday American citizen of Middle Eastern heritage. Nothing outstanding or unusual.”

“Who is it, Slater?”

Now, a man of similar countenance approached her and struck up a conversation. It didn’t appear as if he initiated a smooth romantic move for her amorous attention either. But he took into account that the woman’s fourth left finger sparkled from a gold wedding band. That in turn caused him to glance at the man’s appropriate finger. Walla, similar wedding band as well. His look resembled hers per Goldstein’s description. The olive-hued skin complexion, dark brunette hair—he waited a second and a minute.

“A Kareem Zareedah. No bells rang here. You, sir?”



He didn't hide his disappointment. "None for me either, Slater. Still, she looks like someone we need to know a bit more personally."

"Why is that?"

"Hold on."

Lincoln thought and thought and thought again. Something about this hadn't added up. He studied her picture for months until he could sketch it from memory. This was the woman. But facial rec' never lied. Then like the sudden eruption from an IED in the Middle Eastern desert, a couple of epiphanies struck his suspicious cord. One, Israeli counterintelligence garnered psychological insight and generated a behavioral listing into what constituted a suicide bomber. Point One: Inappropriate clothing. Well, he scrutinized her attire earlier and deemed it appropriate enough for the weather tonight. The man dressed in a like manner with a waist length black leather jacket, he caught a glimpse of an open-collared shirt, blue jeans and expensive white Nikes. No check here.

"Sir?"

Point Two: A robotic, stiffened walk due to the actual bomb attached to their person. He failed to notice any bulkiness beneath their outerwear. He spied both of them as they came in and he couldn't check off in affirmation on that point either.

"Sir, are you—"

"Yes, hold on, Slater."

Points Three, Four, Five and Six: Physical anomalies like sweating, nervousness and the inability to relax. Yeah, go figure with a bomb strapped to the chest. Here he detected signs of those traits. The pair talked in what he classified as low whispers. As they did so, each bent their

necks for more intimate communication that nullified other itching ears curious to listen. Their eyes shifted in all directions, but not in a panicky mode of inspection. He'd flag them here with a check minus. Okay, he thought he blew his counter-surveillance now. Just then, the woman with poise directed the man's attention toward them. He hadn't needed to warn Troy or Goldstein; they played it coy like professionals. They even laughed and conversed with some gamblers at a crap table. After a few more seconds, they turned away from him and them.

"Sir, do I need to bring the reinforcements?"

"Give me a few more minutes and I'll let you know."

Point Seven: Their breathing. He noticed the heavy rise and fall of her inhaled and exhaled. He deemed his a bit more prominent than hers. If they possessed a bomb, what were they waiting for? Maybe they waited for who instead of what. Nevertheless, even here, their respiratory system signals hadn't revealed the fullness of potential harm to the casino and the patronage. Maybe another check minus here. Troy and Goldstein studied him on the sly and knew he maintained his vigil for the information from Slater so they remained as they were.

Point Eight: That glassy-eyed stare. He only witnessed it once and that was when the duo trained their sights on him for about fifteen seconds. Other than that, no check off here either. When the pair ceased to talk with each other, they each mumbled under their breaths while they surveyed the venue. That's Point Nine. Big check mark with plus signs. Now, he felt the familiar chill of terror when he confronted the enemy in various battles around the world that caused the hair at the nape of his neck to stand up. Now, he also heard the mild panic in Slater's voice.

“I’m coming down now—”

“Another couple of seconds—”

“You already said that, sir—”

“Slater, stand down.”

He heard her displeasure with a slight groan and continued the countdown. Points Ten and Eleven: Ah, here’s where he relaxed a bit. No large bag was present that might house the explosive and if no bag was present, then no hands manipulated the triggering device. A double negative check-off in the column. He thanked God. Those eleven points, for the most part, accounted for the woman and they cleared her. However, for a male suspect, Point Twelve required an analysis as well. Here, the man failed and failed miserably. Point Twelve was if the man recently shaved off his beard. The simple grooming action helped the bomber assimilate into the throng of humanity he encountered for the last time, on earth that is, and eliminated any suspicion toward them. He hadn’t doubted the man’s lower half of his face lost some of its natural olive complexion due to a lack of sunlight exposure. Checkmark. Big checkmark. With just a few red flags, his suspicion may be nothing. But this nothing felt like a something. If they weren’t the bombers, then they waited on someone who was as he thought earlier. Now, for his second epiphany and here’s where he pulled Slater back into the conversation.

“You asked me why this woman was someone we need to know a bit more personally?”

“Sure, five minutes ago, sir.”

“The why is because everybody has a doppelganger and you’re right. It’s time for the reinforcements. Get your gear

and tell Najeerah the same thing. Meet up at the cars. Go now.”

“Yes, sir.”

He broke off the call and slipped his cell phone back into his front pants pocket. He feigned interest in the crap game himself. That was the cue Troy and Goldstein waited for as he walked away from the table. The duo followed in his wake a shortened distance from the casino action. Troy started the conversation.

“I know you. Tell me it’s clobberin’ time.”

“I don’t know what time it is yet except it’s time to get outta here.”

“What’s goin’ down, sir?” Goldstein asked.

“I hope nothing, but it doesn’t feel that way. Facial rec’ doesn’t lie, but I still have a hunch that woman is one of the most dangerous terrorists in the world.”

“A Jihad Jane? Been seein’ that with increasin’ frequency,” Goldstein said.

“Give an order, Sergeant Major.”

He studied the intensity in Troy’s face and command. Yeah, women weren’t the only humans with a ‘sixth sense’. Detectives called it, ‘playin’ a hunch’. Military personnel called it, ‘coverin’ your backside’ or ‘check, then verify’. He synchronized his military training with biblical study and called it, ‘Discernment Survival’. Now he checked himself. Here they were in Las Vegas, a much-needed time away from the stress of a strenuous career and he can’t even relax for a few more hours before this husband and expectant father reunited with his wife, unborn son, and family. He couldn’t help it. All of them trained to look for evil, trained to identify it in all its ugly demigod glory, which was without doubt a matter of a depraved, hostile

opinion. If he didn't make any waves for a few more hours, he slept, let the rest of them lose their money, rose early tomorrow morning and hello, Candace Marie and Lincoln, Jr. End of story. But...

"Sergeant Major, give an order," Troy repeated with urgency.

At last, Lincoln dug his hotel room key out of his pocket and handed it to Troy.

"Get all of our stuff and Goldstein yours. Slater and Najeerah are doin' the same. Meet us at the cars."

"And our mystery guest?" Goldstein asked.

"Las Vegas PD. Go."

The bosom buddies snaked their way for the elevators about twenty yards away and still within sight. He grabbed his cellphone again when the woman led the man for the lobby doors. He searched the casino floor for any one of a security capacity and struck out. He shifted his vision to the elegant, old expertise on the spiral staircase for the same. Nothing even close to protect and serve there either. As options ran out, the situation left one. He had to take her down himself.

## 4

Through the maze of awestruck frivolity about him, he spotted them as they exited into the Vegas night. They maintained nice smooth but still harried gaits as if they had somewhere to be in short order. In fact, the woman exposed a cell phone from her strapped purse and pushed a button, which probably meant she contacted someone important on speed dial. With the device to her ear, she fast walked and waited, fast walked and waited. After a few more seconds, she gave up the call with a push of a button. He couldn't decipher what she said to the man, but it appeared as if he agreed. This in turn fueled their legs' velocity a few more inches per second.

On the other hand, if he ran, what's the worse that happened? It could trigger a 'fight or flight' response in his suspects. Said suspects might be armed or have quicker access to a weapon than he did. Or worst of all, what if somehow, it was who he thought it was and she possessed an IED or other more calculated plan to release massive destruction? He relied on his sharpened to that razor's edge Discernment Survival thus far that constituted his studying the Word and his combat training and global missions. They saw him through to the end of whatever circumstance he encountered as a civilian or in the field.

He stepped outside into a balmy 65-degree night. It took seconds before his two combined definitions of the word hope enthused his desire for a happy and swift end to whatever he believed brewed tonight. He recited it many times amidst life's vicissitudes: The ability to foresee a change in your future with an outstretched neck. Yeah, and when his baby brown eyes, which Candace said reminded

her of silky caramel, witnessed a pair of LVPD patrol officers who kept vigil on the proceedings, Jesse Jackson's back in the day motto, 'Keep Hope Alive', catapulted to the forefront of his thoughts as well. Maybe, just maybe, if this situation turned out for naught, he repeated maybe, just maybe, a few dice thrown here or there with a slot machine handle pulled released his pent-up tension in celebration.

Taxis, cars and people gathered in one jovial soup of humanity waylaid him but for a moment.

"Officers?"

"Can I help you?" one LVPD patrol officer asked.

He was a white man about mid-thirties with short red hair and freckles as if he still harbored some childhood disease. He needed to cross the border into Arizona to play basketball for the Phoenix Suns since he stood about six-foot-seven or eight. Not the most handsome mug, but with an NBA contract as his entrée, that's all most women needed to know. His buddy kept more with the national average of five-foot-seven or eight but a stocky two-hundred and fifty pounds. If something jumped off tonight, he wasn't in shape to do anything about it.

What delayed him more than the mass of homo sapiens that dilly-dallied about the casino grounds beat anything people retained to delay his final destination. About to answer the officer's question, the ground rebelled against its topside neighbors with jarred birth pangs of seismic plates the small patrol officer announced to the rest of the horde as an—

"Earthquake!"