

## Chapter 01

### United States Embassy

#### Amman, Jordan

“You’re needed back in the embassy, it’s urgent.”

“Wrong guy,” Payton Ladd said. “I’ve a flight to catch.”

“John Thornton called a few minutes ago to make sure you hadn’t been waved through.”

Payton glanced away from the Marine Embassy Security Guard who leaned down to his driver’s open window. Irritated, he took a deep breath. What now?

Another MSG, on the other side of the embassy’s main gate, circled a Citroen Coupe with a leashed Belgian Malinois security dog.

At the moment, Payton’s only interest was his first run in months along the South Carolina shore in front of his Isle of Palms beach bungalow. After eight months undercover in Egypt and the botched operation that cost his team the lives of two good men with Egypt’s State Security Investigations Service, he was through with the Middle East for what he hoped would be a long time. Before he’d left for the airport forty-five minutes ago, he’d stopped by Regional Security Officer John Thornton’s office. John had assured him he’d be on vacation for the next month and to forget about any Diplomatic Security Service, DSS, business. They’d said their goodbyes and he left.

“Make it quick, Faheem,” Payton said to his Palestinian driver.

Faheem drove the five blocks back to the embassy building and pulled his Volvo behind a line of military vehicles parked around the circular drive.

“Don’t turn it off. I won’t be long,” Payton said.

Faheem nodded.

Urgent or not, he'd make sure John kept it short. His flight left in less than two hours from Queen Alia International Airport, and he planned to be on it.

Payton made his way up to the second-floor DSS offices.

John had his telephone hunched up between his shoulder and his bald head. He waved Payton to the chairs in front of his desk.

Payton sat with his long legs crossed at the ankles. He glanced at his watch. An hour and twenty minutes 'til wheels up.

"King Abdullah will be there and I want Queen Rania seated next to the ambassador's wife." John listened, then said, "No, the second table." He replaced the phone.

"Glad I caught you."

"Caught me for what?"

"Your time off."

"Which I plan to enjoy."

John flipped open a folder, peered over his half-moon glasses, and handed Payton a piece of paper.

Payton saw the memo's letterhead, "Embassy of the United States of America, Baghdad, Iraq."

"We have a situation," John said.

Not my problem, Payton thought.

"I'm not going to miss my flight."

"Catherine McCabe asked for you."

Payton readjusted in his chair. He would never have expected to hear her name, especially after the way they'd ended their relationship.

"She's in Baghdad?"

"Been RSO for several months," John said.

"I heard she'd taken a position with a corporate security company."

"Didn't last. She's too ambitious to let a challenge the size of Baghdad slip by. Don't you two have a history?"

"We were together for almost two years in Mexico."

"One person in a relationship with an embassy security job is hard enough but two?"

John shook his head.

"We knew the odds and had a great run of winning hands. Look, you need to find someone else. Remember, for the next month I'm not available."

"She asked for you because an American's disappeared outside the Green Zone.

Ambassador Rhodes called Director Santiago in DC and requested your immediate transfer to Baghdad." He pointed with his glasses to the memo. "I received the request a few minutes ago."

Payton handed it back unread. He stood and walked over to the window.

"They need someone with your special talents. The situation's a top priority because the person who disappeared is Senator Miles Ater's nephew. *The Senator Miles Ater.*"

Payton gazed down at the helicopter on the helipad behind the embassy. He could recommend any number of competent agents in embassies around the globe who'd be able to find a missing person. Why request someone she had a failed relationship with? Though scarred over, his soft spot for her had never disappeared. Catherine was special, someone he once

thought he could spend the rest of his life with. Well, until she blindsided him and blew up what they had.

He turned back to John. "You and I both know kidnapping's a growth industry in the Middle East. Pay the ransom, end of story," Payton said.

"There hasn't been a ransom demand and they're not sure he's even still alive."

"If he went outside the Green Zone on his own, the odds are he's already dead," Payton said.

"We botched the transition to civilian rule when we let the Shiite-Sunni civil war rage on for so long after we took Saddam out. Now our military's concerned we only have one more opportunity to stabilize the country. Since Ambassador Rhodes was put in charge, real headway's been made to bring both sides together."

"After so many dead, it's about time."

"Ater disappeared in part of the city controlled by one of the principal militia leaders involved with the truce talks. There's no indication he's involved with Ater's disappearance, but if he or any of his people are implicated, then the entire negotiation process could be derailed."

"And the killing starts all over again," Payton said.

"The military, Ambassador Rhodes, and the White House want him found without delay to minimize any chance the talks could collapse."

"Then throw several agents already in the embassy on the case. Why me?"

"They don't want just anybody. They want the top man hunter in the service."

If it was anyone other than Catherine, he'd push back harder. There'd be no South Carolina beach. He moved away from the window and leaned with both hands on John's desk.

"After I find him, I want an additional two weeks off."

“I’ll make it another month,” John said.

Payton sat back down. “What do we know?”

“Not much. He disappeared after midnight.”

“Why’s the chairman of the Appropriations Committee’s nephew in Iraq?”

“Audit work of some kind.” John folded his hands on his stomach paunch. “Ambassador Rhodes was appalled when he arrived to take over for the Coalition Provincial Authority, CPA, and saw how lousy the situation on the ground was. The military knew they invaded with too few troops, and when the CPA took charge, the manpower fiasco worsened. To fill the void, our military’s gone outsource mad with private contractors.”

“The whole debacle could’ve been prevented,” Payton said.

“Well, now we own it.” His desk telephone started to ring. “Your flight leaves at four.”