

Chapter One

The black sedan drove slowly up a palm-lined Beverly Hills street, its funereal appearance out of place in the bright sunshine. It was August 20, 2012.

Few people were outside on the broiling afternoon. The great homes' histories and ghosts of dead movie stars didn't interest the car's driver, a middle-aged Ethiopian man in a suit. Their shrubbery and lawns did. How did these rich Americans keep them green despite the drought afflicting Los Angeles? When he was a boy, he had to walk six kilometers for water.

The car turned onto Crestview Drive and stopped in front of a large, Tudor-style mansion. With its gables and bay windows, it might have been plucked from the sixteenth century if not for the clean bricks.

The driver looked for a number on the house to make sure he had the right address. There it was, 216, on a bronze plaque beside the front door. He lowered all the windows so the car wouldn't be too hot when he returned to it. Unlike his own neighborhood on the other side of Los Angeles, there was no need to worry about a break-in here.

The Ethiopian got out of the car and checked his reflection in its window to see if his tie was straight. His fine, Semitic features and tawny complexion suggested the northern part of his country.

It was too hot to linger. Deciding he looked pretty fit for a man in his forties, and proud he had wound up in a job that required a suit—in America, no less—he strolled up the front walk.

The well-tended roses reminded him of his last posting in India. He tried to figure out the association and recalled the rosewater they put in the milk there. He had a good memory, a faculty that served him well as an intelligence agent. There were so many names, faces and numbers to remember. Few Ethiopians lived in India—that government had too many poor of its own to be generous with visas. But there were lots of Ethiopians in America, and most of them hated his employer. It was hard to keep track of them, his memory notwithstanding. It was a good thing the files were computerized now.

He pushed the doorbell and heard a deep chime. *Hadish*, he thought in his native Tigrinya—strange—how the Indians had come to his country and dominated the world rose market with their gigantic plantations. He'd been assigned overseas by then, but he imagined the rose farms were very beautiful. He hoped to see one someday.

It was the maid's day off. In the kitchen, Hanna Schwartz, an attractive Ethiopian woman of nearly fifty, seasoned two steaks herself. On hers went the ground mixture of

red chili peppers, garlic, ginger and basil her people called *berbere*. Her American husband's was graced with butter and garlic. Despite the pleasant chore, her large, expressive eyes hinted at a painful past.

A countertop TV played *Oprah*. Next to it sat an expensive, copper espresso machine, a birthday gift from her husband.

The kitchen was already furnished when she had arrived six years earlier, but she liked its cozy, Dutch country decor. The appliances were big, more suited for a hotel kitchen than a home. Her husband used to do a lot of entertaining. It had taken her a long time to feel comfortable buying the delicacies that filled the cabinets.

She heard the doorbell and peered out the window. The black car in the driveway puzzled her. It wouldn't belong to her husband's friends or business associates. They drove Jaguars, Mercedes and Porsches.

Then she saw the diplomatic license plate.

SCREENSHOT OF PAGE SHOWING CHAPTER MARKER

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