

THE DISCIPLE

STEPHEN COONTS



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To Deborah

God willing, with the force of God behind it, we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism.

—Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

MAY: SYRIA

The dark green bombs fell from a milky sky. There were six of them, weighing a ton apiece. They had been dropped from an altitude of about twenty-six thousand feet, so the fall was going to take a while.

On the ground, Mikhail Toporov heard the distant, fading thunder of the three warplanes. Although he didn't know it, they were Israeli F-15s. He scanned the sky. The visibility was excellent in the dark air under a high cirrus layer, which made the sky look a dirty white. Toporov saw nothing. If he had looked harder, he would have seen the aircraft as black dots against the white clouds, but his eyes were not focused for really distant objects. Even as he looked, the falling bombs were accelerating toward terminal velocity.

Mikhail Toporov was offended by the airplane noise. There should be no aircraft at all in this prohibited zone.

Toporov flipped away his cigarette and walked quickly back into the air defense command and control bunker. Meanwhile the GPS modules on the tails of the bombs located their satellites and began issuing steering commands to canards that protruded from modules screwed into the noses of the weapons. Each bomb steered toward its designated target.

As the warplanes completed their postrelease turns and steadied out on course for home base, Mikhail Toporov leaned over the shoulder of one of his Russian colleagues seated at a radar console and looked at the display. The radar was sweeping . . . and there were no returns.

"Select the local area display," Toporov said.

"That *is* the local area display."

It didn't compute. Toporov had just heard the planes. "Select fifty kilometers," he said.

A flip of a switch, and still the scope was empty.

"Something is wrong," Toporov said, his mind racing.

Now only three miles above him, the bombs plummeted down.

Inside the administration building for the Syrian nuclear reactor, which was just next door, less than fifty yards away, Dr. Raza Qureshi was eating lunch at his desk while he scrutinized the latest draft of the government's Top Secret plan to stockpile enriched uranium for future nuclear warheads. He had written the plan upon direction from Damascus; it was almost ready to be signed and forwarded to the ministry.

Dr. Qureshi gave little thought to the political implications of the plan—he was concerned with the technical aspects. Still, he knew that Syria and her allies in the Middle East had many formidable enemies, with the most formidable, Israel, not very far away. It was his belief that the national leaders were prudent and correct to plan for the future.

He used his fingers to select a piece of cold meat as he scanned the text. He was a compulsive editor, one who was never satisfied, even with his own words, and now he saw a word that perhaps should be changed. He abandoned the food plate in midgripe. He drew a careful line through the offending word and wrote the one he wanted immediately above it.

That done, he laid down the pen and checked his watch. He had another half hour before he needed to go to the control room.

Qureshi reached again for the food plate and resumed reading.

There were seventeen people in the reactor control room. A dozen technicians monitored dials and gauges and made meticulous notes in logbooks. Behind them, four electricians were trying to find the fault in a relay panel, which seemed to have developed a short. They had the front of the panel off and were working with voltage meters.

The technicians were engrossed in their work. The reactor had been down for a month for maintenance, and they were engaged in the prestart checks. They were almost finished. Just now they were pulling the rods from the pile one at a time, then reinserting each one, checking to ensure that they had complete control of every rod. So far, everything was working just as it should, praise Allah, but Dr. Qureshi was a demanding taskmaster who insisted on no shortcuts. Intently focused, they continued their work.

A man from the ministry in Damascus was watching and taking notes. He spoke to no one, asked no questions. Even though this was his very first visit to the reactor, he acted as if he knew everything, so there was nothing to ask; most of the people in the room suspected that he asked no questions because he was afraid to reveal the depths of his ignorance. In their experience, political people rarely knew anything about the reactor or how it worked. This one, they had concluded hours earlier, was like all the others.

Seventeen people, all of whom had only seconds more to live as the bombs fell toward the earth toward the reactor, toward them.

An F-15 and two F-16s banked into a lazy right-hand circle around the reactor, twenty-two thousand feet above the ground, still well under the cirrus layer.

The reactor off their right wings had been constructed under a large pitched roof, which resembled that of a barn, or even an old factory. The roof was there to hide the reactor from satellites and aerial reconnaissance. A half mile to the northeast of the building was the Euphrates River, a broad, brown, placid, meandering highway that stretched to the horizon. The reactor had been under construction for six years, so the disturbed area above the ditches in which the water pipes were buried that carried river water to and from the reactor were no longer discernible from this altitude.

The single-piloted F-16s were merely escorts for the F-15, which had a two-man crew. The man in the rear seat of the F-15 Eagle centered his handheld camera on the roof of the reactor. Fortunately, the visibility was excellent today. The camera was a digital one with a long lens, one designed to take five photos a second automatically if the shutter button was depressed and held down. The pilot in the front seat was counting down the seconds. "Six . . . five . . . four . . ."

At four, the cameraman depressed the shutter button and held it down. He concentrated on holding the camera steady and keeping the reactor centered in the viewfinder.

In the anti-aircraft defense control center, Mikhail Toporov was still baffled. Something was wrong—he had heard jet engines, and there should be no aircraft in the prohibited zone, none whatsoever. He reached down beside the man at the scope and pushed the red ALERT button on his console. Instantly, a siren sounded in the control room.

A siren also sounded in the reactor administration building. Startled, Dr. Qureshi looked up, just as

time to see his secretary walking into his office. That was the last thing he saw as the first bomb penetrated the roof of the building, plunged through all five floors and detonated in the basement of the structure. The floors heaved before they buckled. The desk on which he had been working was flung upward and struck Dr. Qureshi in the head, knocking him unconscious. He was killed when the building collapsed around him.

In the reactor control room, a siren also went off. Shocked, the technicians stared at the gauges in front of them, trying to understand. The reactor was cold, so this couldn't be the nuclear alarm.

Even as they realized it was an air raid alert alarm, the bombs smashed into the roof of the reactor and penetrated deeply, one at a time, two-tenths of a second apart. The bomb fuses were set to explode before the weapons penetrated all the way through the structure into the earth; they actually exploded just above the massive concrete floor that formed the support for the reactor. The trip-hammer explosions—a total of five tons of high explosive—destroyed the pile, destroyed the coolant pipes and pumping systems and rods and rod machinery and the hydraulic systems that controlled them. It also destroyed the walls and machinery and ceiling, reduced everything to molten rubble. The explosions were so hot that steel and concrete ignited.

In the adjacent control room, everyone died instantly as the control panel, which faced the reactor, was driven into them by the successive shock waves. The control room was completely crushed, which was fortunate, because anyone surviving the initial blast would have been cremated alive by the resulting inferno or quickly poisoned by the radiation released from the nuclear pile.

In the F-15 the photographer was capturing all of it. Later, technicians examining the photos would be able to count each individual explosion. The guidance system in every bomb had worked flawlessly. The Americans made good stuff.

Now, through the viewfinder, the photographer saw smoke pouring out of the reactor and adjacent administration building. Soon the rising smoke obscured the buildings, so he released the shutter button. He waited a moment, watching the smoke column, which he knew was radioactive. It seemed to be drifting off toward the desert to the southeast, just as the weather gurus predicted it would.

“Let's go home,” he said to the pilot, who banked the jet smoothly around onto a heading back toward Israel.

Mikhail Toporov heard the explosions over the wail of the siren. He ran outside. The anti-air defense center was on a low ridge two miles from the reactor. He stood stupefied as black smoke roiled up from the place where the reactor and admin building had stood. Their remains were hidden by the smoke.

That was no meltdown—he knew that. Airplanes. *Bombs!*

The Syrian in charge of the facility joined him. “What happened?” he demanded in Russian, the only language that Toporov spoke, as he jerked at Toporov's sleeve.

“Look for yourself, fool,” Toporov roared, gesturing wildly with his free hand. He jerked his other arm free and went back inside, the Syrian trailing closely.

“Why didn't your radars detect the planes?” the Syrian screamed over the high-pitched blast of the siren. He, too, had leaped to the conclusion that the facility was bombed.

“I don't know,” Mikhail Toporov replied bitterly. He was very worried. The people in Moscow, he knew, would be apoplectic when they heard the news. First and foremost, he must get possession of the tape that recorded everything the radars saw during the last hour. Only with that tape could he prove that the S-300 air defense system—a combination of radars and computers that controlled

batteries of SA-20 anti-aircraft missiles—failed to detect the incoming bombers. Only with that tap could he save himself.

When the warplanes landed in Israel, two men in civilian clothes stood outside the operations building watching them. One was about five and a half feet tall, heavyset, with a rounded tummy and a crew cut. He wore khaki trousers and a white short-sleeve shirt with buttons down the front and a pocket protector in the left breast pocket. His name was Dag Mosher, and he was a senior officer in Israeli intelligence, the Mossad.

The man beside Mosher was an American. A half foot taller than Mosher, he was lean, with graying thinning hair combed straight back. His face was not handsome; he had a square jaw, gray eyes and a nose that was a trifle large. His face and arms were tanned. He was wearing blue jeans and a pullover golf shirt with a logo on the left breast that he had apparently acquired at some summer festival in the States. He was the new CIA head of Middle Eastern Operations, and his name was Jake Grafton.

They watched the planes shut down in revetments. The crews were picked up by a little van, which brought them to this building and let them out in front of it. Still in their flight gear, the pilots and Weapons Systems Operators straggled into the building carrying their helmets and chart bags. Mosher and Grafton followed them.

The civilians sat in the back of the room and listened to uniformed intelligence officers debrief the flight crews. Neither asked a single question. An hour later, as the crews gathered their gear to leave, a technician brought in bomb-damage assessment photos of the target reactor and taped them to the blackboard. Mosher and Grafton strolled to the front of the room and, when the flight crews had had their looks and left, adjusted their reading glasses and studied the photos carefully.

The intelligence debriefers packed up their gear and departed. When only Mosher and Grafton were left in the room, Grafton dropped into a folding chair and asked the Israeli, “Are you guys going to bomb Iran?”

“You know we can’t without aerial tankers. We’d need to borrow some of yours.”

“Anything you bomb in Iran will release radioactivity. Lots of it.”

“Their problem,” Dag Mosher said and dropped into a chair beside Grafton. He sat looking up at the row of photos.

Finally he turned to Grafton. “All the choices are bad—every one has a great many negatives attached. I certainly am not one of the decision-makers, but I can tell you this: If Israel is destroyed, it will only be because we gave every last drop of blood and that wasn’t enough. We Jews got in line and shuffled into the gas chambers once—but never again. Never!”

Mosher turned back to the photos and sat staring at them.

“I think the driving force in Iran for the acquisition of nuclear weapons,” Grafton said conversationally, “and perhaps the destruction of Israel, is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. One wonders what might happen in Iran if he died unexpectedly.”

Dag Mosher turned slowly to face Grafton. He sat silently, examining his face. Finally he said, “Was that thought hatched in Washington, or did you dream it up?”

“Well, I’m kinda new to the Middle East,” Jake Grafton drawled, “and, I confess, I thought that one up all by my own self. There’re probably a hundred good reasons not to pop Ahmadinejad. Not crickets, bad form, and all that. You won’t hold this against me, will ya?”

A trace of a smile appeared on Mosher’s face; then he turned back to the photos.

“Same country, different subject,” Jake Grafton continued. “I’ve sent one of my best men to Iran and he’s going to need all the help he can get. I was wondering, do you folks have a few people there who can discreetly watch his back? I would appreciate a heads-up if he appears to be getting in to

deep.”

Dag Mosher looked amused. “Tommy Carmellini, perhaps?” he asked casually.

“Why, yes,” Grafton said with a smile. “Let’s hope the Iranians are not as well informed as the Mossad.”

“We can always hope,” Mosher admitted.

The air attack upon and destruction of Syria's nuclear reactor was a media nonevent. Nothing about the attack appeared in either Syrian or Israeli newspapers or broadcasts. The Syrians quickly began cleaning up the reactor site, using the expedient of pushing dirt into the hole with bulldozers, then pouring in concrete. Syria did, however, ask the UN for sanctions against Israel for violating Syrian airspace and attacking a "military storage area." These sanctions failed when Syria refused to allow an inspection of the attack site and, attempting to silence rumors, denied that it even had a nuclear reactor.

Still, whispers swirled through the diplomatic community worldwide. Unable to stonewall any longer, the Syrians decided to change the lie. A week after the event, the Syrian minister of information acknowledged that Syria had had a reactor under construction, a reactor at least several years from completion, and that was the site bombed by the Israelis.

Still, the Western press generally ignored the story. Without verifiable facts the story had no legs, and, after all, even if there had been a reactor, the Syrians didn't have one now.

The unofficial, nonpublic reaction in various capitals around the world was less tepid.

In Washington the president was briefed on the attack over breakfast by his new national security adviser, Dr. Jurgen Schulz, and the director of the CIA, William S. Wilkins. Rounding out the foursome was presidential aide Sal Molina, who this morning was togged out in a sports coat that didn't go with his trousers. Schulz was dressed as usual in a tailored wool suit and silk tie; he was trim, with a full head of dyed hair, thickened, some suspected, with hair implants. He looked like a natty Harvard professor on government leave, which he was.

Wilkins never made that kind of effort. He was a career intelligence bureaucrat and looked it. He was balding and slightly overweight and wore trifocals, a suit from Sears and a cheap, out-of-date tie.

Since he had just come from his morning workout, the president was wearing sweats.

As breakfast was served by the White House staff—yogurt with fruit, cereal and 2 percent milk—Wilkins asked Schulz, "How come so many of the national security advisers have had German names?"

"It's fashionable," Schulz said with a straight face.

When the staff had retired, leaving the four alone, the president said, "What do you have, Bill?"

Wilkins ran through the facts of the attack and the poststrike assessment.

"So the Israelis are at it again," Schulz remarked. "What are the chances they'll decide to derail Iran's nuclear program?"

"The distances are too great," Wilkins said. "They'll need our help, and it won't be a one-location strike. The Iranians have two reactors, three enrichment facilities—centrifuge, laser and heavy water—and an underground bomb-making plant that is impervious to conventional attack."

"I thought the National Security assessment was that Iran didn't have a weapons program."

"Your predecessor thought so," Wilkins said drily, "and you know how that came about."

Indeed, they all did. After the American intelligence community concluded, based on circumstantial evidence, much of it manufactured by Saddam Hussein in the hopes of deterring Iranian aggression that Iraq had nuclear weapons, the administration had used the erroneous assessment as justification for invasion. The discovery that Saddam did not possess, nor was he building, nuclear weapons had proven to be a major embarrassment. The intelligence agencies were even more embarrassed, and the discredited professionals had decided to insist on verifiable facts before they would again put the

reputations on the political chopping block. The entire basis of a sound foreign policy, good intelligence, had gone off the track. Arguably, the assessments immediately went from too aggressive to too conservative—and one was as bad as the other.

“To the best of our knowledge,” Wilkins continued, “the Iranians are enriching uranium. They are not presently manufacturing weapons.”

“What will it take to convince you?” Schulz asked.

“An explosion with a mushroom cloud,” Sal Molina said heavily. A Hispanic lawyer who had been with the president since he started his political career, Molina didn’t have a big title at the White House. In fact, no one seemed to know just what his title was; his refusal to make speeches, attend parties or fund-raisers or talk to the press added to his aura of mystery.

The president broke the silence that followed. “I have read the assessments, read the raw reports the assessments were constructed from, and I’ve looked at the satellite photos. It is beyond dispute that they are spending billions on enrichment facilities. I am convinced Iran is gearing up to make bombs. There is no other logical explanation.”

The president paused to gather his thoughts, then continued. “A nuclear Iran may well prompt other nations in the Mideast to go nuclear. Iran’s leaders are unstable men. Ahmadinejad is a megalomaniac, and God whispers to Khamenei. It’s within the realm of possibility that they could go on a nuclear jihad to wipe out Israel and conquer the Middle East.”

“We can’t attack those nuclear sites,” Schulz said. “If we do, we are likely to release a cloud of radioactivity that will drift God knows where. The Israelis did it and got away with it, but if we do, the political fallout in this country will be awe-inspiring. Every tree-hugger, green weenie, peacenik and left-wing radical between Canada and Mexico will go ballistic. The firestorm will be even worse in the Middle East; it’ll bring down every pro-Western government, shatter the Middle East like Humpty Dumpty. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men won’t be able to put the Middle East back together, not in our lifetimes.”

The president glanced at Schulz, measuring him, perhaps. “No doubt you’re right,” he said, “but I’m not going to sit on my thumb doing nothing while those religious crackpots nuke Israel. When we know precisely what the threat is and how much time we have, then we can figure out the best way to get this mess unscrewed.”

“How much time *do* we have?” Sal Molina asked the CIA director, who was frowning at his cereal, which tasted, Wilkins thought, like ground-up cardboard.

“I don’t know,” Wilkins said. “Six months, a year, two years . . .” He shrugged. “Getting good intelligence out of Tehran is extremely difficult.”

“We need it in spades this time,” Jurgen Schulz remarked.

The president put down his spoon and stared at Wilkins. “I know they are gearing up to make bombs. I accept that as proved. I want the CIA to answer two questions: When will the Iranians get operational warheads for their missiles, and, once they have them, what do they intend to do with them?”

Wilkins nodded.

“I don’t want reports quoting some unhappy Iranian scientist or guesses from the analysts. I want absolute, incontrovertible proof. In writing, signed by Ahmadinejad, with his and Khamenei’s fingerprints all over the paper.”

Wilkins looked from face to face, then returned his gaze to the president. “You are asking the impossible.”

“Absolute proof,” Schulz said.

Wilkins took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “We’ll do our best.”

“Keep Sal advised,” the president said. “He can brief me and Jurgen.”

“Yes, sir.”

~~Wilkins glanced morosely at his cereal, then reached for his coffee cup, which was empty. S~~
Molina snagged the insulated decanter and poured him another cup.

Two days after the attack, in downtown Jakarta, Indonesia, a limo with dark windows drifted to a stop by a sidewalk café. A man sitting in one of the chairs near the street rose carefully to his feet and motioned to the waiter. He tossed several bills on the table, then hoisted two attaché cases from the chair beside him as the driver held open the rear passenger door. The man seated himself, the driver closed the door and resumed his seat, and the car pulled away into traffic.

Inside the car the man with the cases sat looking at the backseat passenger, a middle-aged man in an army uniform, one with short sleeves. He had stars on the flaps of the shirt and an impressive array of ribbons on his left breast.

“General Darma. Good to see you again,” the man said.

The general nodded. He knew the man as Hyman Fineberg, but knew that was not his real name. He took his time examining Fineberg’s face. The left side was heavily scarred and didn’t match the right and his left eye didn’t track. It was artificial, of course, inserted into the socket merely to fill it. Fineberg also had an artificial left foot and ankle, but he walked so well that his gait was normal to a casual observer.

Fineberg’s left sleeve was longer than usual to hide some of the scars on his left hand. The general, who had never seen a day of combat in his life, wondered—again, for this was the third time he had met Fineberg personally—what the rest of Fineberg’s anatomy looked like. He would have been shocked, had he known. Fineberg was the sole survivor when a sabot round destroyed his tank, and there had been days when he wished he had also died. That was years ago, though, when he was young. Now Fineberg lived with his disabilities and tried to ignore them.

The car glided expertly through traffic, even though it was armored and weighed almost four tons. Meanwhile, the general realized his scrutiny of Fineberg was impolite and averted his gaze to the aircraft-aluminum attaché cases.

Fineberg glanced at the back of the driver’s head.

“My son,” the general said.

Fineberg pulled the closest case onto his lap, used a key to unlock both the locks that held it and moved it over to the general’s lap.

The first case was filled with U.S. currency, packs of hundred-dollar bills stuffed tightly inside.

The second case was as full as the first.

“Your down payment,” Fineberg said.

The general closed the cases and arranged them in the middle of the seat. Fineberg handed him the two keys.

“So,” said the general, “have you decided where it will occur?”

Hyman Fineberg took his time answering. “The lobby of the hotel, I think. He stayed in the presidential suite on his last visit. Your people kept the lobby empty for his arrivals and departure. There will be no witnesses, no cameras, no innocent bystanders.”

“He may choose a different hotel.”

“He might,” Fineberg acknowledged, “but he is a creature of habit. One suspects it will be the same hotel, the same suite.”

“He had four bodyguards,” the general mused, “and they were armed. We allowed them the weapons as a courtesy.”

“Of course.”

“How many of you will there be?”

“Four,” said Hyman Fineberg. ~~“We have the money to purchase only one chance, so we must~~ prepare for it wisely and use it well.”

The general smiled and ran his left hand over the top of the attaché cases. “You may not wear uniforms. Civilian clothes only.”

“Of course.”

“No one else must be harmed.”

“I understand,” said Hyman Fineberg. He pushed the button on his left armrest to lower his window an inch, then removed a pack of cigarettes from a pocket. He offered one to the general, who refused, then lit one for himself.

They discussed the murder as if it were a magazine photo op and agreed that whenever another visit was announced, Fineberg would again make contact.

General Syafi’i Darma was philosophical. “No one lives forever,” he muttered. “Life must go on.”

Dag Mosher’s office in downtown Tel Aviv was in a drab, nondescript building a few blocks from the sun-washed Mediterranean. His guest today, Jake Grafton, got the only padded chair in front of his desk. The two technicians who joined Mosher and Grafton sat in metal folding chairs and held their graphs and reports on their knees. They talked for ten minutes. Summing up, the senior tech, a woman in a print dress with iron gray hair that she pulled back in a bun, held a graph where Grafton and Mosher could see it and said, “There was no increase in Syrian electronic activity immediately before or during the attack. This graph shows activity in ten major wavelengths, and as you can see, the lines are essentially flat.”

Mosher nodded.

The junior tech, a man wearing eyeglasses so thick they distorted other people’s view of his eyes, said, “The ECM tapes from the planes show nothing but routine search radar scans were detected. The pilots reported no anti-air activity. No interceptors were scrambled by the Syrians. The conclusion is inescapable; the Syrians never detected our planes.”

Mosher nodded and glanced at Grafton to see if he had any questions. He didn’t. Mosher thanked the techs, and they gathered their stuff in their arms and left, closing the door behind them.

“That ALQ-199 is quite a gadget,” Mosher said.

“It is until someone steals the software and sells or gives it to the Russians,” Grafton remarked. “After your attack on Syria, I have a sneaking suspicion that acquiring an operable ALQ-199 or the software that drives it became the number one priority of the Russians.”

“And the Iranians . . .” Dag Mosher mused.

“And the North Koreans and Chinese. We could make a list.”

“So how are we going to get them one?”

A smile flitted across Jake Grafton’s face. “I am sure you and I can think of something,” he murmured.

A week after the destruction of the Syrian reactor, a tall, lean man in an expensive suit stepped out of a hotel in Tehran and, despite the severe air pollution, lit a cigarette. He had only had a few puffs, however, when a black limousine pulled up in front of the hotel. A man got out of the right front seat and held open the rear passenger door. The tall man flipped his cigarette onto the sidewalk and climbed in.

The tall man was Janos Ilin, and he was a very senior officer in the Russian Foreign Intelligence

Service, the SVR (*Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki*), the bureaucratic successor to the First Chief Directorate of the Soviet-era KGB.

After an hour's creep through horrendous traffic, the limo eased to a stop in front of the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense. The man on the curb who opened the door was in his late twenties and clean-shaven and wore a suit without a tie. Ilin noticed a bulge under his left armpit.

"This way, please," the man muttered and gestured toward the door. Then he led the way.

Inside the foyer stood two desks, one on either side of the room. At each desk sat two armed soldiers in uniform. Their AK-47s lay on the desk in front of them, and they wore sidearms in belt holsters. A wire mesh ran from floor to ceiling in front of the desks so that visitors couldn't grab the weapons. Today there were three people in front of one desk and one in front of another, all in earnest discussion with the uniformed officers.

Trying to talk their way in, Ilin thought.

His escort didn't bother with the guards but walked straight to the door at the rear of the room. The door opened as he approached, and he led Ilin through. There was no visible magnetometer or X-ray machine.

Five minutes and four flights of stairs later, Ilin was ushered into the office of the minister of defense, who was there waiting. His name was Habib Sultani. He was of medium height and wore the fashionable short beard and, although he was a major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—the IRGC—a cheap, rumpled dark suit that looked as if it came off the rack of a Moscow department store. The escort stood in the back of the room with his arms folded across his chest.

Ilin nodded at Sultani and paused to survey the room, which was large. On one wall was a banner that proclaimed in English, in letters a foot high, DEATH TO AMERICA. On another wall was a large portrait of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader.

Ilin glanced back at the escort. This must be the minister's nephew Ghasem.

General Sultani shook hands perfunctorily, motioned toward a chair and pushed an ashtray across his desk. "You may smoke, if you wish," he said, then seated himself behind his desk.

Ilin settled into the indicated chair, crossed his legs and took out his silver cigarette case from an inside coat pocket. He selected a cancer stick and snapped the case shut. "Being a good Muslim, of course you don't smoke," he said as he stored the case back in his pocket.

"No," Sultani muttered.

"Too bad," said Ilin, then lit his weed. When it was giving off smoke, he added, "Every man should have at least one antisocial habit."

"This attack on the Syrian reactor . . . The Syrians tell us that the S-300 antiaircraft defense system did not function. Not a missile was launched at the attacking planes; not a single shot was fired."

Ilin nodded his head once, a silent yes.

"You sold us the same systems."

Ilin's nod was barely discernible. He puffed at his cigarette.

"General Ilin . . . May I call you that?" Habib Sultani paused, then rolled on. "General Ilin, we have the great misfortune, like the Syrians, of dealing with you incompetent, perfidious Russians. The Americans are on three sides of Iran—in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Even as we speak, warplanes may be on their way to attack us."

Ilin examined the glowing tip of his cigarette. "You people are producing highly enriched uranium and you promised you wouldn't."

"Iran must have a stable, modern source of electrical power."

"Don't give me that! We both know the mullahs want nuclear weapons and they've squandered billions on the facilities to make them."

Sultani's voice rose to a roar, and he came out of his chair. "Lies, all lies! You justify an attack on

the nation of God with lies! We will not listen. Russia took our money, made promises, and we are left with useless hardware, defenseless against powerful enemies. You tell your Premier Putin that he cannot play us for fools. If he wants cooperation and respect, he will have to earn it. So far he has earned nothing but contempt. Tell him that.”

Sultani sat and mopped his face with one hand.

In the smoky silence that followed, Ilin said, “Obviously, the Israelis were using secret American electronic countermeasures technology to shield their planes from detection.”

“Americans invent, innovate, research . . . and Russians lie, cheat and steal. Your ambassador assured us that the S-300 system could detect and defeat the latest frontline American and Israeli fighters. We wouldn’t have bought it without that promise, and you and the ambassador and Vladimir Putin know it.” His voice began to rise. “We do not need any more long-winded technical explanations of how clever the Americans are or how they outwitted you Russian geniuses. Nor do we need any more worthless, obsolete equipment that doesn’t work—we already have hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of *that*.” Sultani opened the top button of his shirt.

“General Sultani, if your reactors are used for peaceful power generation and you don’t enrich the spent fuel for fissile material,” Ilin said coolly, “as you promised us and the international community, you probably have nothing to worry about from the Americans and Israelis.”

“Don’t lecture me or try to dictate foreign policy to the Iranian government,” Sultani snarled. “We are surrounded on three sides by enemies of God. Keep your promises. Give us an anti-aircraft defense system that works as you said it would.”

Janos Ilin was still as cool as he was when he walked into Sultani’s office. “The latest American CIA assessment, which they made public, said Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program. Is that true or false?”

Sultani’s eyes narrowed to slits.

Ilin stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and rose to go.

Habib Sultani stared at Ilin’s back as he walked out, followed by the escort, Ghasem.

There were two of them standing on the sidewalk ahead, two young men, watching me as I approached. We were in a working-class neighborhood—read slum—in Tehran, Iran. They stood there watching me, then glanced at each other.

I was out for my morning run, wearing shorts and a sweatshirt, and I stuck out like a sore thumb—clean-shaven, barbered, fair skin. Obviously I was a foreigner, European or American, and consequently rich. No doubt they thought I had something worth stealing. I did—my wallet, diplomatic passport, and cell phone.

I kept my eyes on them as I trotted toward them. I sized them up as working-class guys, rough clothes, unshaven, who thought they were tough. Well, all three of us would soon find out.

I glanced over my shoulder to see who was watching or following, just in case this might be a setup. No cars following, none parked nearby, no cops, three or four men in sight, all busy doing something else.

The distance closed rapidly; then I was there and they came at me, one from each side. I veered toward the one on the left, set my feet just so and kicked him in the crotch. Caught him solidly. He hadn't expected that move and doubled over.

I spun around and went at the other one, who had started to come at me. Only then did I see the little knife he had in his right hand. My charge was unexpected. I grabbed his right wrist with both hands, half turned and threw a hip into him. Using his momentum, I pulled him into me and threw him, still holding on to that right wrist with both hands. The bones in his arm snapped with an audible crack. As he hit the sidewalk and the knife skittered away, I released his wrist. His lower arm was twisted and turned about sixty degrees from its proper angle.

I was tempted to tell him, "Bad break," but stifled myself.

It was all over in less than eight seconds and I was trotting on. I glanced back. Both of them were writhing on the sidewalk, with a couple of bystanders staring at me.

Running in the megalopolis of Tehran was an adventure. Not so much the running, but crossing the streets.

Like most cities in the third world, Tehran had grown exponentially as the population exploded in the aftermath of World War II. The dearth of contraceptives meant large families, the medicine men used just enough modern medicine to keep more of the kids alive, and rural peasants moved to town looking for a job. Today Tehran and its sprawling suburbs contained somewhere between fifteen and twenty million people, about one-fifth of the Iranian population. The population explosion meant the Iranian economy needed to create eight hundred thousand new jobs a year, and that wasn't happening.

The streets, avenues and boulevards, all built for one-fifth the amount of traffic they were carrying, were clogged. Gridlock was the proper description of morning and evening rush hour. Road rage was endemic. Many of the drivers and motorcyclists regarded a pedestrian, especially one moving quickly, as a sporting challenge. Crossing the street became an exercise in terror.

There was heavy air pollution, too, so bad it made Los Angeles' smog seem like an unattainable dream. It seared the lungs, burned the eyes and limited visibility on windless days to no more than two miles.

Today, as usual, I managed to get back to the hotel in one piece, with more close calls in my logbook.

After a shower, I dressed and walked the three blocks to the Swiss embassy annex, a small building

just down the street from the real Swiss embassy. Although America and Iran had not resumed diplomatic relations since the takeover of the American embassy in 1979, the United States had recently opened an American Interests Section in the Swiss embassy annex. Of course, my little corner was in the basement.

The room was small and divided by a waist-high temporary wall, the bottom of which was plywood nailed to two-by-fours and the top of which was latticework. The whole thing was painted a hideous brown. In the wall were two windows, one for me and one for my colleague, Frank Caldwell.

Here Frank and I took applications from Iranians asking for visas to visit America. We also were supposed to interview folks who wanted to permanently immigrate to the good ol' U.S. of A., but since our government was worried that jihadists might slip through, they had declared a moratorium on immigration requests. Consequently we took only tourist visa applications, none of which the State Department would approve unless we were absolutely sure the tourist would indeed come flying home to this mud-hut Islamic paradise when his vacation was over.

I probably should pause to introduce myself. My name is Tommy Carmellini, and although I was stuck here in this basement four hours a day interviewing Iranians who desperately needed a vacation in the heart of the infidel empire, the United States, I didn't work for the Department of State. Nope, I was a CIA operative. I was pretending to be a State visa guy while I tried to steal the deepest secrets from the mullahs. So far I hadn't found any secrets to steal, deep or shallow. I had, however, met a lot of Iranians with fathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, nephews and children safely lodged in America who they wanted to visit; see before they died, either the host or the visitor, and renew those precious family ties; then, you betcha, come on home.

"Hello," I said in English to the one-legged man who seated himself before me. He had been waiting upstairs since the annex opened. He had a crutch, no artificial leg. He was maybe forty-five with a big mustache and grizzled jowls.

"Hello," he said back, also in English, and passed me his form.

I looked at it. His name was Abdullaziz Nasr Qomi. I didn't recognize the name of his village, so I asked him about it in Farsi, or Persian. I attended a crash course to learn the language before I came over here—but more on that later.

His face brightened a little as he told me about his village, a little place near Takab, which I knew was west of Tehran and up toward the big lake, Urmia.

I listened to him talk, getting most of it despite his regional accent. I glanced at his hands and saw they were heavily callused. This guy wasn't a bureaucrat or apparatchik.

He worked in construction, Qomi said, was a day laborer. He paused and then said heavily, "I want to go to America." Since we were praying over a tourist visa application, he added, "For a visit."

"How'd you lose your leg?"

"The war with Iraq. I was in the Martyrs Brigade. I stepped on a mine. I was ready to die, ready to go straight to Paradise, but I didn't. I am still here, with only one leg."

"Must be difficult for a one-legged man to make a living in Iran."

He didn't reply to that, merely lowered his head.

I confess, I liked the guy. Qomi was tough, and he'd obviously been through the mill and survived. I have little sympathy for victims, but I really like survivors. My ambition is to be one myself.

"You married?" I asked, then glanced at the form. He had marked NO.

He still had his head down.

"Whom do you know in America?" I asked, not waiting for an answer. "Who are you going to visit?"

He started telling me about his cousin who finished concrete in Queens. As he talked I sat back and glanced around, at Frank Caldwell, who was interviewing a weeping woman in a chador, and at the dingy, damp little room.

I recalled the day that Jake Grafton called me in, told me he wanted me to do an intensive course in the Persian language, then go to Iran. Three months later, I got the language completion certificate written in English and Farsi; I was ready to trade insults with Cyrus the Great. I reported back to Grafton at the Company headquarters in Langley.

Jake Grafton was a retired naval officer, an attack pilot, retired as a two-star, and for years he had been the go-to guy when . . . shall we say, “situations” developed and the politicians or Pentagon brass needed some serious help with their hot chestnuts. Finally they gave him a job in the Company. He was smart and tough as shoe leather, and if he was ever afraid, it never showed. In addition, he was a genuine nice guy, but I don’t think he wanted anyone in the agency to know that. Believe me, the outfit operated on the theory that nice guys finish last. In the spy game, they often did, so maybe Grafton was the exception that proved the rule.

Me? Of course I’m a nice guy—my mother would sign an affidavit to that effect. However, there is a lot she doesn’t know. In fact, she is in the dark about 99.9 percent of the stuff I do. She knows that I live in suburban Maryland; she sends me birthday and Christmas cards. I think she knows that I work for the agency, but maybe not. I might have lied about that. She didn’t mention it during my last visit, so I didn’t either.

The sad fact is I tell a lot of lies. Most of them are professional, in the line of duty, so to speak, but every now and then a personal lie slips out. Maybe it’s habit; the darn things pop out before I can stop them, more smirches on my character. Perhaps it’s just my criminal mind. Whatever, I’m still a nice guy, and you can take that to the bank.

One April Tuesday a few days after I finished the language course, we were settled in Grafton’s office talking about the state of the planet and the people on it, just covering the ground, so to speak, when he said, “I want you to go to Iran next week. You’ll be attached to the American Interest Section as a visa officer.”

I nodded. I’m not the swiftest guy you ever met, but after doing the language course, I had a sinking inkling this was coming. I had hoped it would come later, much later, but my luck doesn’t run that way. Persia, which is presently the Islamic Republic of Iran, complete with mullahs, religious fascists, holy warriors and throat-slitters, plus tens of millions of folks just trying to pay their bills and stay alive. Am I lucky or what?

Grafton’s desk phone buzzed and he got it. “Yes.”

He listened a moment, then hung up. “I have to go to a meeting,” he said as he unlocked his safe, which was beside his desk. He pulled the safe door open and handed me a sheet of paper from the gloomy interior.

“Here’s the access codes to the file I want you to read. Look it over, then come back to see me.”

I went to the converted broom closet the Company so blithely labels my office and shoved aside the mountain of read-and-initial crap that had accumulated on my desk during my absence and I hadn’t had time yet to go through. I fired up my desk computer.

The Company is trying to go digital, but very carefully. The last thing on earth anyone in the building wants is a hacker getting into our files. Or worse, a foreign intelligence service. Still, the advantages of going digital are so attractive that we are trying.

Three or four screens into the file, my hands started to sweat. Then my forehead. I had to take off my sports coat and hang it over the back of my chair.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current president of Iran, was a real piece of work. Born in the provinces, his devout father changed the family name to Ahmadinejad, “virtuous race” or “Muhammad’s race,” when he moved to Tehran in search of a better life. Young Mahmoud studied mathematics at a private school, then went off to the university in 1975. By all accounts he was very devout. In any event, he fell in with the religious political movement, which was moving toward a revolution against the shah. The head revolutionary was Ruhollah Khomeini, who preached a vision of a society led by zealous, uniquely qualified Islamic leaders who would control the “simple-hearted” lower classes. This Islamic Bolshevik went further: He believed that anyone who rejected his ideas, which one critic, Alireza Jafarzadeh, said were “dogmatic, rigid, feudalistic, medieval ideas contrary to the true teachings of Islam,” was not a Muslim. Like Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and the legion of tyrants who had slashed their way through history before him, Khomeini was an all-or-nothing guy. Ahmadinejad signed on early; he was one of the first to join the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps while at the University of Science and Technology.

After the shah was routed in 1979, Ahmadinejad joined the Intelligence Unit of the IRGC, which Khomeini put together to defeat his political enemies following the collapse of the shah’s secret police service, the SAVAK. This Iranian version of Hitler’s Brownshirts operated with no constraints on their methods. Ahmadinejad was right in the middle of it. He was in Khomeini’s inner circle those days and probably helped plan the takeover of the American embassy in November of 1979. There was some debate about whether he was in the first wave that scaled the walls, but he was definitely there shortly thereafter, in charge of the guards and watching the interrogation of American prisoners. He might even have been in charge of interrogations.

There were a couple of photos in the file of Iranians mobbing the U.S. embassy. A figure in each had been circled and labeled as “possible.” I whipped out the magnifying glass that all good agents and employees keep in their desk and studied the faces within the circles.

Even after I had enlarged the circles as much as possible before they dissolved into individual pixels, I decided that I would have to take the experts’ word for it.

I put the glass back in my desk and continued reading.

In the years following the revolution, during Khomeini’s consolidation of power, Ahmadinejad was involved in the interrogation, torture and execution of enemies of the regime at the Evin prison, where he was known by the pseudonym of “Golpa,” among others. The interrogators tried to stay masked and change their *noms de guerre* regularly so that their victims wouldn’t know what they had told them. The prodemocracy political movement Mujahedin-e Khalq, or MEK, supplied many of the victims.

For his loyalty and ruthlessness, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became a senior commander in the Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC. The report I was reading said he had been a key figure in the formation of the Qods, a terrorist special forces unit that had been linked to assassinations in the Middle East and Europe. Ahmadinejad personally carried weapons across international borders to assassinate political foes, among them the Kurdish leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iran. On occasion this young Iranian Stalin reported directly to and gave his orders from the Ayatollah Khomeini, who had sole and complete control of the Qods.

I didn’t read the whole file. I scanned enough to realize that Ahmadinejad was involved in every aspect of the fundamentalist Islamic takeover of Iran. According to Jafarzadeh, he interrogated U.S. hostages, led the closure of universities, questioned and tortured political prisoners, engaged in battles on Iran’s western borders with Iraqi forces and conducted special assassination ops against the regime’s enemies in Europe and the Middle East.

An unintended consequence of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was to give Khomeini and the Iranian mullahs a golden opportunity to exploit the chaos in post-Saddam Iraq in furtherance of their goal

installing an Islamic regime there and making it a satellite state. Saddam Hussein had a lot of faults but he knew who his real enemies were.

In the 1990s Ahmadinejad went into academia. Part-time, anyway. He was a zealot still trying to purify the universities, and founded Ansar-e Hezbollah (Followers of the Party of God), the members of which wore black clothes and hoods, sort of a Muslim Ku Klux Klan, and attacked student gatherings and demonstrations, beating up students and other opponents of the regime with chains, clubs, truncheons and knives. They could talk the talk, but when the chips were down, they were thugs.

In 2003 Ahmadinejad surfaced as mayor of Tehran, where he earned the nickname of the “Iranian Taliban.” In 2005, this social progressive launched his campaign for the presidency of the country. Since he had the backing of Khomeini’s successor, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the election was rigged, he won handily.

I perused a few of his campaign speeches, in which he often waxed eloquent on the glory of martyrdom. “If we want to resolve today’s social problems,” he said, “we must return to the culture of martyrs.” Now there is a prescription for social peace.

The election of 2009 was a farce. Three hours after the polls closed in a country three times larger than France, one without a single voting machine, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner with 61 percent of the vote. Apparently the ballots weren’t even counted.

When I had had all I could stand, I logged off and turned off the computer.

Just my luck. Jake Grafton was pointing me toward the biggest, most vicious shark in the sea. He hadn’t told me yet what he wanted me to do in Iran, and I could hardly wait.

I surveyed my comfy little office, which I got to visit so seldom anymore. Why couldn’t I be in charge of something like . . . building passes?

I went downstairs to the Starbucks concessionaire for a Caffé Mocha, bought an extra one for Grafton’s assistant, Robin, then strolled toward Grafton’s office.

“Oh, thank you, Tommy,” Robin said with a huge grin when I presented her drink.

I smiled back. After all, she might be the last normal person I’d get to smile at on planet Earth.

With that happy thought ripping through my head, I went in to see Jake Grafton, who was back from his meeting.

Grafton got right to it. “What do you think about Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?”

“A raghead Stalin.”

“That isn’t a politically correct remark.”

I shrugged. “There are a lot of assholes in this world. He seems to be in a special, small elite group at the very tip top of the heap.”

“There are a couple of guys already in Iran that you’ll work with. They are illegals. You’ll be attached to the American Interests Section of the Swiss embassy and will be watched. Careful, you’ll be watched.”

I could feel the earth spinning under me.

“What’s the mission?”

“I don’t know just yet. Settle in, become a good, low-level career diplomat, and I’ll call you when we need you. You are going to be our ace in the hole.”

“More like a deuce,” I muttered. I confess, I knew he had something in mind for me or he wouldn’t have made these elaborate plans for my future. Trying to get a hint, I said, “One of these days you’ll call and tell me to steal Ahmadinejad’s underwear, while he’s wearing it.”

Grafton didn’t smile or look annoyed. There was no reaction at all. He should have been playing poker in Vegas.

The weeping of the chador-clad woman seated in front of Frank's window brought me out of my reverie. She was a grandmother, she said, and her sons and their wives and grandchildren lived in the States. She wanted to join them, if only for a visit. Of course, she would never return to Iran, would be swallowed up in the churning sea of Middle Eastern immigrants in New York and never be heard from again.

"The mullahs are finished in Iran," Abdullaziz Nasr Qomi said. "Everyone hates them. They are rich, we are poor. All the oil money goes to the government and the mullahs, and none of it reaches us. The mullahs are living very well, though . . ." He continued, giving me his view of the world in which he lived.

Frank was concentrating on the weeping woman. He looked as if he were ready to go through the little gate and put his arms around her shoulders. He was murmuring comforting words.

He was very fluent in Farsi, could do all the dialects so well he could fool the natives. I certainly couldn't. Frank was in his forties, a career case officer, and no doubt a damn good one. Only fluent speakers could read body language, the subtle hints given by intonation and hesitations, appreciate the choice of words, understand what was meant but not being said. Fluent speakers do better at sorting truth from lies. If only the Company had more guys and gals like Frank Caldwell!

Yet he had spent six years in Istanbul at the embassy visa window, denying visas to Iranians and trying to recruit spies. Now he was in the heart of the beast, still at it. He reminded me of the guy in charge of the candy store who never, ever, said yes.

Abdullaziz Nasr Qomi finished his discourse on the state of the Iranian nation, such as it is, and stopped speaking. I forced myself to focus on him. What I saw was a stolid peasant with one leg and work-hardened hands who needed a chance. Just a chance at life, which had dealt him shitty cards so far.

I took a deep breath and looked at the form in front of me. A tourist visa. I got my pen out of my shirt pocket and flipped to the endorsement area on the back, where we were told to always mark the NO box. I marked YES.

"I am going to recommend approval of this tourist visa, for a period of one month," I told Qomi who was obviously shocked. He had been told he was wasting his time, but he came anyway. Hell, he knew he was going to die when he marched across that minefield, and yet he lived.

Life isn't rational.

He grinned at me, displaying yellow, broken teeth. No dentist had ever seen the inside of his mouth.

"Check back in two weeks," I said. "Bring your passport."

Qomi couldn't believe his good fortune. He dropped the crutch. He reached for my hand to pump it, then realized he didn't have the visa yet.

"Two weeks," I repeated.

He got up and arranged the crutch, then pegged off up the stairs. As the grandmother sobbed, I got busy writing up the reasons why the United States of America should give a tourist visa to one Abdullaziz Nasr Qomi. "Mr. Qomi has an incredible love for his native Iran—the land, the people, the culture, the whole enchilada—and he loathes America. His family had to beg him to visit his brother, a concrete finisher in the bowels of Queens who is in poor health, and his brother's family, including a daughter who plans to marry during Qomi's visit. I have absolutely no doubt Mr. Qomi will return to the bosom of his extended family in and around"—I had to check for the name of his village, which I inserted here—"prior to the expiration of his visitor's visa."

I looked at my screed. One big lie, but . . . ho-hum. The United States was certainly big enough to swallow Mr. Qomi whole.

I signed my name with a flourish as Frank Caldwell finished with the sobbing grandmother who wanted to go to America. The answer, of course, was no. She was going to die here in Iran, in the

third-world squalor of the Islamic Republic, and by God that was that.

As the black chador disappeared up the stairs, Caldwell said to me in an accusatory tone, "I thought I heard you tell that last man that you would recommend him for a visa?"

"Yep."

"You can't do that! You've read the directives from—"

"I made the recommendation. State can grant it or not, as they choose."

"You know that guy won't come home."

"If we've got room for thirteen million illegal Mexicans, what's the big deal about one one-legged Iranian?" I dropped the visa app in the tray.

"Goddamn it, Carmellini. You can't give State the finger—"

"You oughta try it sometime, Frank. It'll make you feel better. Almost human."

"Carmellini—"

"Why do you do this, Frank? Why sit here day after day, month after month, year after year, looking at the human parade and always saying no? Why don't you go get a real job and a life?"

"Because—"

"Why?"

"I like these people. Don't you?"

I pushed the heels of my hands against my eyes until I saw stars.

"Am I the only sane man left alive?" I asked aloud.

After a last glance at Frank, who was still staring at me, I pushed the button to flash the light upstairs, summoning my next victim.

The evening after he returned from Israel, Jake and Callie Grafton entertained one of Callie's faculty colleagues from Georgetown University, where she taught in the language department. Professor Aurang Azari and his wife were Iranians. A year or so after the fall of the shah, he and his wife had left Iran to study in England. They had met and married at Oxford, and upon graduation, he scored a teaching position there. Four years ago he secured a position in the mathematics department at Georgetown.

Azari was of medium size, in his early fifties, Jake knew, and was not a man who would stand out in a crowd. His wife was much like him in size and demeanor, almost a female twin.

In the last few years, Professor Azari had become an authority on Iran's nuclear program. Regularly quoted in the press, he also did op-ed pieces for the big newspapers and had even written a book about Iran's nuclear program. None of this would be possible, of course, without a private intelligence network inside Iran, a network made up of enemies of the regime.

The CIA had attempted to recruit the professor several times and had been rebuffed each time. Grafton thought that Azari and his friends had probably belonged to the Mojahedin-e Khalq, the People's Holy Warriors, who first supported Khomeini and the mullahs, then became their enemies. The MEK attracted Marxists, intellectuals and the educated, all of whom the fundamentalists feared. Stealing a page from Lenin, after the Islamic Revolution Khomeini and his disciples arrested, tortured, interrogated and executed many of their political enemies. Some of the survivors, who were scientists and technicians, were recruited into Iran's nuclear program. They—Grafton thought—were probably Azari's sources, his spies.

Foreign intelligence services, including the CIA, are usually bottom feeders, vacuuming up the gossip of laborers and low-level functionaries. Azari's sources delivered gold. That their reports got from Iran to Azari said a lot about the inefficiency of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard security service. Any large classified program had leaks, but Iran's was a sieve. Still, the CIA had had no success generating the kind of intelligence that Azari obviously had access to.

Naturally, Azari knew about the Israeli attack on the Syrian reactor, even though not a word about it had appeared in the Washington or New York newspapers.

"What do they think about that in Iran?" Jake asked innocently at the dinner table.

"They're worried men," Azari said. "They might be next, and they know it."

"One would suspect so," Grafton replied thoughtfully.

When it became obvious that was Azari's only comment, Callie asked her guests what they thought of fundamental Islam. "I know you are both Muslims," she said, "but I am curious, as I know most Americans are. Are the fundamentalists representative of the Islamic mainstream? What do you think?"

Mrs. Azari deferred to her husband, as apparently she always did. He said, "Fundamentalist Islam is the last gasp of a traditional way of life that is rapidly dying. One writer, Edward Shirley, called the Islamic Revolution in Iran 'a male scream against the gradual, irreversible liberation of women and the Westernization of the Muslim home.' He was right."

Later, after dinner, Jake asked the professor to come to his study. He shut the door behind them and said, "I don't want to insult you, but would you like a drink?"

A guilty look flitted across the professor's face. "A little wine would be welcome," he admitted. "I developed a taste for it in England."

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