

CHAPTER 1

Abdullah Al-Rasheed thought he was having a stroke. One moment he was perfectly fine, working diligently as the CEO of an obscure but promising London investment firm, and the next moment he felt light-headed and disoriented. The room had seemed to turn invisible, shadows shifted, objects faded then reappeared, many had the same form, but some—most, in fact—had changed.

Blinking didn't change the scene, and when he realized it wasn't a hallucination, his heart started to react by becoming a drum. The computer monitor was larger and had a different color arrangement. Most of the codes and lines were green whereas they were red just a minute before. He raised his eyebrows in disbelief and looked at the wall. Where there had been a hotel-level painting, there was now a large Matisse. The furniture, too, had transformed; more elegant, expensive.

The shimmering had stopped and everything had become solid again. He shook his head, closed his eyes then re-opened them: still the same sight. Then a tangible difference from a different sense: The unfamiliar tufted oxblood leather chair didn't creak as he rose. Trembling and weak, he went to the window and grabbed the sill.

"Ma aldhy yahiddith?" he asked himself through quickened breath. *What is happening?*

The obscene Gherkin Building stood a few blocks away, and the London Eye was in the far distance poking above the buildings across the street. Same view, so his office hadn't changed, but...

The more he realized that it had not been a momentary delusion, that whatever happened was real, the more the worm of anxiety tried to take control of his guts. An attempt to restrain the shaking that threatened to force his knees to fold didn't work as well as he had hoped. His mind was awash with confusion as he struggled back to the

edge of his desk and pressed the 'INT' button on the phone which was larger and more complex than it had been.

"Elizabeth?" he asked, almost breathlessly.

"I'm sorry?" came the delayed response.

The voice was different. "Who is this?"

"Aadila, Mr. Al-Rasheed." There was a pause. "Your secretary."

"Where is Elizabeth?"

Another hesitation. "I don't know an Elizabeth. I've been working for you for four years, sir."

Abdullah jerked his head backward slightly as a cold sweat instantly popped to his skin. *People had changed, too? How can that be?*

"Are you okay?"

No, he wasn't. "Aadila, please try to reach Dr. Shaheed," he said. "I'm not feeling well."

"Of course."

At least, my doctor still exists, he thought. Abdullah fell back into the plush executive chair and took a deep breath. As he tried to quiet his racing heart and calmly evaluate his environment, he noticed two things within milliseconds of each other: first, the number on the lower right side of his screen was \$312,454,932.32. As his mouth and eyes flew open in surprise, he saw another difference: the nameplate on the monitor read COMBS. He had purchased one made by Matsimoto just three weeks before.

The arched ceiling of the aging St. Paul's Lutheran Church in College Park, Maryland, had been crumbling for years, but fund raising efforts had finally produced sufficient money to fix it. The low bidder was an aggressive company named Al-Bina Construction. Bearded men had become a common sight as they walked and worked on the scaffolding above the Nave. They seemed friendly.

CHAPTER 2

Robert Curry finished reading his own biography President Richard Combs had left him in the anteroom of the Oval Office. The reality of ending up in another replacement history had settled in, and with it was the satisfaction of knowing he had accomplished the mission he had accepted many years ago: to end the threat to his Master Entity's creation, Earth. As best he could tell, his life in this timeline was close enough to the one he had originally lived that he thought he could return to it without raising suspicions or concerns. After a deep, calming breath, it was time to go home. *HOME. What a beautiful word.*

His heart had quickened with anticipation as he walked to the hallway door and reached for the handle, then paused. "President Combs?" he said to himself, shaking his head. He still couldn't quite believe it. Richard Combs had been his best friend and partner for twenty-seven years, actually, eighty-eight years if you counted his first life and the second, and the thirty-four years of the current life which he didn't remember.

Less than a week before—in another world, another time—Curry was the President and Combs was his Vice President. But then he failed his mission and a new—a third—history had been created, one in which his arch-enemy, Hiro Matsimoto, was strong and appearing to win the Master Entity's competition. But Curry turned the tables and defeated his foe. He was now in what he hoped would be the final history. It appeared safe and prosperous, and Richard Combs was President.

Through the thirty-seven years of the second lifetime, Curry's heart ached for his family, Kathy, and his daughter, Tyler. At the end of his first history, they died tragically before he was transported back in time. In the second, Kathy died before they met, and Tyler never lived. He never saw them in the third, but now, in the fourth, he was

close to seeing them alive again, looking forward to holding them tightly, loving them more strongly than he had ever loved them.

He finally swallowed hard and opened the door. Agent Stephen Daniels was in the hallway, as promised.

“Agent Daniels, the President said you could take me home when I was ready.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “We can leave now.”

They left the West Wing and got into a black Chevrolet Caprice. Daniels started the car then turned to Curry. “While the President is still in office, I’ll be your conduit. When he leaves office, I will be the leader of the FPOTUS detail. You’ll see me a lot, I’m afraid,” he chuckled.

“I’m not afraid,” Curry replied with a short laugh.

After a moment, Daniels turned serious. “The President filled me in as much as he could. My father had a small stroke when he was about your age, too. It took him a few weeks to remember everything, but he was fine for another twenty years. I think you’ll be okay, too.”

Brilliant, Curry thought. A stroke could be confused with a loss of memory or, more accurately, the fact that he didn’t know things simply didn’t happen. “I appreciate that, Daniels.”

“I prepared that dossier you read. It covers all your recent activities and friends and responsibilities, but I have done a lot more research on my own, so if you get stuck, just call this number, and I’ll be able to help.” He handed him a business card.

Curry nodded. “I might need your assistance. I’m actually nervous about looking stupid.”

“No problem,” Daniels continued. “I arranged for you to take a week’s leave from your teaching duties at Woodbridge College. We can get you completely caught up. I’m sure it will all come back.”

“Thanks.”

Daniels pulled out a different business card and handed it to Curry. “This reads Ronald Meagan, investment advisor, but it is actually the President’s private cell phone number. No one but you has this, and it must remain secret.”

“Ronald *Meagan*. Seriously?” He looked at it and laughed. “That’s my pal, alright.”

“The President said he will be available whenever you need him. Don’t hesitate to call me, too.”

“Thanks, Stephen.”

Daniels smiled and put the car in gear and backed out of the parking space. “You must be good friends,” he said.

Curry shook his head and looked out the window at the familiar surroundings. “You have no idea.”

Daniels waved at the officer in the gate house and pulled out into traffic. Curry was finally on his way to rediscovering the life he had left almost forty years before.

The large sheet of plastic hanging from the scaffolding protected the congregation from falling dust and debris, but it also protected the workers from inquisitive eyes below.

No one noticed the workers any more. After two weeks, they had become as familiar as any other member of the flock. Large bags of construction materials had also become commonplace.

There was no hint of what was to come.

CHAPTER 3

Abdullah surveyed his immediate surroundings more calmly and started to catalogue the similarities and differences, but his mind was no closer to understanding what had happened to him. He heard a muted cheer outside his office, much like the ones that his traders released when something good occurred, only louder.

He went to the door and hesitated, not really wanting to examine anything more than the personal environment he had just started to come to grips with. But, he had to; he couldn't stay in his office for the rest of his life. Cautiously, he opened the door twelve inches and peeked out.

Beyond a desk was an enormous space, crammed with men at computers, all diligently tapping away at keyboards, eyes constantly glancing at a huge eight-sided array of monitors hanging in the middle. He closed the door hard, pushing against it as if to hold back the reality of what he had seen. Heart racing, he felt his brain was about to explode. He had built the trading floor from a base of himself and one partner six years before and expanded it to eight traders and seven support staff. There must have been close to seventy people in the room. *A stroke*, he thought. *I'm certainly having a stroke and imagining all of this.*

He decided that the best course of action would be to lie down on the couch and get some sleep. When he awoke, he was certain things would be back to normal.

"Abdullah!" someone yelled from the other side of the door. "Abdullah!"

Abdullah fought the urge to avoid the intruder, but he had apparently already been seen. There was really no escape, so he opened the door just far enough to face the short, sweaty man.

"What do we do with our position in Midweb? It's a dollar away from your target price."

As if driven by another force, he opened the door fully. It sounded like a different voice he heard from outside his head—but it was his, and it was full of confidence. “Wait for \$95. Then sell. It might be next week, but that is as high as it will get.”

“Yes, sir,” came the response and the unquestioning small dark man scurried away. Abdullah had no idea who he was. Then: *Wait! How did I know that?* He tried to analyze the decision process he had used, but the only words he could bring up were: *I just did.*

A woman he assumed was Aadila appeared as he remained in the doorway. “Are you alright, Mr. Al-Rasheed?”

The honest answer: he didn’t know.

“Mr. Al-Kazim would like to see you. And the doctor is on his way.”

Mr. Al-Kazim? That name was not familiar. “Who?”

“Dr. Shaheed.”

“No. Not the doctor.” He tried to sound calm. “Who wants to see me?”

Aadila looked at him oddly, brows furrowed. “Your partner, Khalid Al-Kazim. Are you sure you’re okay?”

What the hell? My partner is Donald Whitehead.

Confused fragments of possible actions tumbled through his mind, but at the base was one concrete, driving fact: He needed to make sense of this new world, and surely *someone* had to know what was going on. If the doctor couldn’t help, certainly his ‘partner’ would. Whoever Khalid Al-Kazim was, maybe he could straighten things out. “Tell him to come to my office, please. After the doctor leaves.”

“Yes, sir.”

Abdullah closed the door and walked around the office, touching objects, sorting and analyzing, searching for answers until Aadila announced the doctor’s arrival.

“I feel fine,” he offered to Dr. Shaheed a moment later. “But, I seem to have disorientation.”

“Let me take a look.” The doctor took Abdullah’s vital signs and determined that except for an accelerated pulse and blood pressure, he seemed to be in perfect shape.

“We’ve talked about this, Abdullah. You have to find a way to calm down. You are as tight as a drum. Relax. Stress can do powerful things.”

Like, have a Matsimoto monitor turn into a Combs monitor? He wanted to ask. “So, it is stress?”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything physically wrong. Go home and get some sleep. Visit your summer place and don’t talk to anyone for a week.”

What summer place? Abdullah pushed that away and pondered the doctor’s words. *Could it be stress?* “I’m very busy,” he said, almost by rote.

“That’s your normal answer, Abdullah,” Shaheed sighed. “I don’t expect you to change. Just try to relax more. You see what happens if you don’t.”

Shortly after the doctor left, Abdullah went to the window and stood there, his brain spinning. A moment later, the door opened, and a tall, dark, sophisticated man with thick silver hair entered. Abdullah turned toward him. He was impeccably dressed in a deep blue suit. He smiled at Abdullah as a friend would, but he did not look familiar at all.

“Abdullah,” the man said calmly as he sat down in front of the desk and settled in. “You are having an interesting day, yes?”

The man had a strong middle eastern accent, not unlike his own. Abdullah then considered the man’s words and straightened up. His eyes narrowed. “Who are you and how do you know that?”

The man motioned toward the desk. “Please sit. We have much to discuss.”

Cautiously, Abdullah returned to his chair and sat, eyes never leaving his visitor.

“The good doctor probably blamed it on stress, correct? But it is not, my friend. I will explain who I am in a minute, but first: tell me about your morning.”

Abdullah did not know how to start; this was a total stranger, but also someone who seemed compassionate, understanding, and willing to listen, which he needed very badly at the moment.

Abdullah cleared his throat. “Alright. I seem to be having some mental issues today. I’m having a hard time remembering and comprehending things, almost everything, in fact. I realize this will sound crazy, but...” Abdullah shifted his weight in the plush chair. “Listen: Aadila said you were my partner. But my partner is Donald Whitehead and...”

Khalid raised his hand. “I know, Abdullah. Nothing makes any sense to you right now. I understand you must be disoriented,” the man’s smooth voice poured over him, somehow comforting. “But underneath the confusion, you have a sense of clarity. Am I right?”

Clarity? Although it seemed like an odd choice under the circumstances, the word climbed out from under the chaotic mass of other words and suddenly sat at the forefront of Abdullah’s mind. When the trader approached him fifteen minutes before, there was nothing of the usual second-guessing, none of the normal fear of making a wrong decision; he simply answered the question with a very real self-assurance that surprised him. When he had looked at the Matisse hanging on his wall, it oddly seemed to fit. Yes, he did feel intense disorientation, but under it, there *had* been a profound sense of familiarity, a certain lack of ambiguity, as if the contents of his office belonged there, to him.

“How do you know this? Who are you?” he paused. “Who am I? What is happening?”

The man leaned over to the intercom. “Aadila. We are not to be interrupted for any reason.”

“Yes, sir.”

Khalid sank back into the comfortable chair and stretched his long legs. “What I have to tell you will be difficult to comprehend. I’ve been waiting many years to have this conversation.”

“But we just met,” Abdullah said, cocking his head to one side.

“No, my friend. We have been together for seven years as partners.”

Abdullah recoiled. “Seven years! But... How...”

Khalid held up his hand for silence. “In these last seven years, we have done very well in the financial world in preparation for a holy

mission. But our success has been limited. Now that you are here, we will complete our mission.”

“Mission? Now that I am *here*? What are you talking about? I’ve always been here, and I’ve never met you.”

“We are partners not only in Saalab Investments but in the service of Islam. My job has finished, and now I will help you fulfil your destiny—our destiny.”

Abdullah stared blankly at this strange visitor who spoke riddles. “Our destiny? Our quest? I don’t understand, Khalid. I don’t understand anything of this. I…”

Khalid interrupted with a wave of his hand. “Wait, please. I will explain. Today is May 13, 2000. This is the day when one history has replaced another.”

Abdullah’s mouth fell open then snapped shut. “One history? Replaced?” Khalid’s words had made no sense. “This is not a good explanation, Khalid.”

“In time, you will understand it all. Let us start at the beginning. You felt very strange sensations today, yes?”

“Sensations?” *More like break down*, Abdullah thought as he took a deep breath and tried to again settle his racing heart. “Oh, yes, I experienced very unusual emotions that I can’t explain, but…”

“I know what you are going through. Listen carefully. It happened to me seven years ago. But, it was actually today.”

Abdullah opened his mouth to respond, but then shut it and narrowed his eyes again, just staring into the man’s dark eyes. Other options, more rational ones, started to surface. “I see,” he said softly. “Is this an elaborate scheme to force me out, to drive me crazy? It won’t work.”

Khalid shook his head. “It is not a scheme. It is true. I must explain.”

Abdullah searched his visitor’s face for signs of deception but found only sincerity. He waved his hand. “Please.”

Khalid continued. “Today was a transition, from my leadership to yours. You have been given a great gift by Allah, the gift of foreknowledge, the ability to see all the critical events that will occur

in the next sixteen years. I was given this gift on this same day, which for me occurred seven years ago.”

“Today is seven years ago? The next sixteen years?” Abdullah put his hands on the sides of his head, rocking slightly back and forth. “This is making it worse, Khalid.”

“Hear me through. Let go of everything you think you know and listen carefully. On this day in the year 2000, a mysterious Iranian man, a stranger, visited me. A short time into our conversation, I began to feel odd.”

“What do you mean, odd?”

“It was as if a mist formed and I descended into it.”

Abdullah’s eyebrows rose. “A mist?”

“The man said it was the Mist of Allah. I never heard of that before, but it did seem as if I was being consumed by it.”

Abdullah searched his memories. “I remember a story about a Mist of Allah, but it was a fable.”

“It is real. I heard a voice, but it was not the man speaking. It was like an echo. I felt it penetrate me; become a part of me, and I became part of it.”

Abdullah looked at the man’s eyes. Again, he saw no deception.

“It gave me instructions,” Khalid continued.

“What did it say?”

“That I must serve Allah unlike anyone has served Allah before. I am to become the Provider for the Caliphate.”

Abdullah’s face softened; his expression had withdrawn from skeptical and somehow he moved past interested and closer to enthralled. “What does ‘Provider for the Caliphate’ mean?”

“The Mist said that I will be returned to 1993 and that I would remember all the critical events that had occurred when I lived through them. With this knowledge, I was to manipulate financial markets and reap huge profits to benefit Islam.”

Abdullah rubbed his forehead as he shook his head and tried to absorb the improbable story Khalid was unfolding. “Khalid. This sounds like... he tried to find the right English word... a fantasy. Time travel? That is not possible.”

“Allah is all powerful. It *is* possible, my friend.” Khalid leaned forward. “And it happened to me. And it has now happened to you. I bring you the same message.”

“I have gone back in time?” Abdullah’s stomach filled with a different form of anxiety, a mixture of fear and anticipation. “I don’t recall anything of the future, so how can...”

“You will remember only what you *must* remember,” Khalid interrupted. “Nothing else. When you need to know something, it will come to you.”

Abdullah thought back to his earlier encounter with the trader. *Is this why I knew what to tell him? Could this be true? Is this what happened?*

A question distilled from the jumble of input: “Why? Am I to be the Provider now?”

“Yes. It is your turn,” Khalid said with a shallow smile. “I will explain it all in due time, my friend, but this is the truth. You lived through these last seven years with me, but don’t remember them.”

“No, I don’t.” Abdullah held up his hand. “Wait. You are saying that I have returned from a May 13 that will exist sixteen years from now. But I don’t have full knowledge of those years, either. I can’t grasp what...”

Khalid smiled. “I know this is difficult, but it is true. Allah is all powerful. Yes?”

“Yes,” Abdullah said.

“Allah controls time and space.”

“And knowledge.” Abdullah was reciting from the Qur’an but paused. “I thought it was just words.”

“No. It is fact. And Allah has taken time in his hands and given you and me great power. For his good.”

“Allahu Akbar,” Abdullah replied then sat still for several moments, reflecting on everything he believed in. *Allah is all-powerful. Anything is possible.* “Allah is using us?”

“Allah is using his *power* to assist us in a great undertaking.”

Abdullah put his elbows on the desk and leveled his gaze at his visitor. “Khalid. You said the word ‘clarity’ a while ago. I don’t understand why, but my mind is not rejecting what you are saying.”

“Because it is true. Somehow, unconsciously, you know that. The Mist of Allah has spoken directly to your heart. Its clarity has entered you.”

A gathering sense of calm filled Abdullah as he turned and looked out the window at the darkening gray clouds over London. “You said that I am a different person than I was, that my memories are of a future time that doesn’t exist.”

“Your life from 1993 has been replaced with the one we shared. And we will share a new future together starting now.”

“But I don’t recall anything of the years that were created for you, Khalid.” Abdullah shook his head. “I have no knowledge of who I am in this world.” He looked around the office and so many beautiful things he couldn’t recollect buying and waved his hands. “Nothing about this is familiar. I am frightened.”

“I know. But you will be fine.”

Abdullah looked around. There were no pictures. “I remember nothing, only fragments of my childhood.”

“Nothing of your past before 1993 has changed, and I will help you remember whatever you need about this life. What is critical, however, is that the major financial events that are going to shape the world in the future are known to you. Using this knowledge, enormous profits will come and ensure our success in our holy mission for Allah.”

“What exactly is our goal?” Abdullah asked.

“To finance the greatest war machine the world has ever known.”

“War machine?” Abdullah tensed.

“For Islam. Our Jihad will be the final Jihad. Because of our success, Islam will reign supreme forever. That is our mission.”

To his surprise, Abdullah realized he had warmed inside and was no longer trembling. In his heart, in his soul, he could feel confidence and strength growing. He began to believe.

“Al-hamdu lillah. Praise Allah.”

Abdullah Al-Rasheed sat quietly after Khalid left, his brain sorting and ordering and examining all that he had learned. When it fully settled, his heart swelled with pride and commitment to Allah, to the

faith of his father and of his youth. Khalid was right: There was clarity. He was awakening. It was as if he already had known he had been chosen for a great role and this day was just the next step.

His childhood in Abu Sakhair came back to him, sitting with the father he loved so deeply, praying and letting the wealth of Islam fill his heart. He also remembered the worst day of his life when he returned as a man in 1991 to his village to protect his father and sister. The American invaders killed them without any thought of their worth, of their goodness.

Over the next hour, the ache and confusion of loss and disbelief had weakened its grip, replaced by a powerful sense of determination. Believing in the mission felt right.

He took a great, calming breath and dialed Khalid's phone. "How do we begin?"

"You must pass a test."

"A test? When?"

"Soon. Let me explain."

CHAPTER 4

The neighborhood was familiar. The house he and Kathy fell in love with almost twenty years before sat there, still nestled on the bend of a tree-lined street.

Kathy stood at the kitchen counter, right where he last saw her before she was murdered in his first life. He thought his heart would pound out of his chest; thirty-seven years of anticipation and now, finally, it was real.

In Kathy's mind, he had to remind himself, he had left the house that morning. "Hey, Bob. You're late."

Robert went to her and turned her around, pulling her body to his, nuzzling his face into her neck. Tears came easily, but he had to control his emotions; she wouldn't understand.

After a moment's hesitation, she gave into him, returning his embrace. "Somebody's a little horny?"

You have no idea, he thought. He tried to weld himself to her, allowing his being to enter hers and become one. They stood like that for a minute before she pulled away.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I missed you," he said. "It seems like years, like thirty-seven years, to be exact."

She raised one eyebrow. "Thirty-seven years? Why not forty?"

He chuckled as he regained control. "Okay. Forty. Who's counting anyway?"

"You're acting strange, but I like it. Maybe Tyler can go to bed early tonight." She raised her eyebrows provocatively. "Daddy needs a little Mommy time."

He laughed. "Maybe Bobby needs a little Kathy time."

"Oh, yeah. That, too."

The front door burst open, and Tyler flew in, her blond hair streaming behind her. Except, she wasn't 'little Tyler' now: his

daughter was eight years older than the last time he saw her. Tall and absolutely beautiful, he had to do a double-take to make sure it was truly her. Then the realization that he would never live through those lost eight years stabbed at his heart—they were gone unless he was allowed to remember them.

She went to Robert and put her arms around him. “Hey, Dad.”

He couldn’t grab her and throw her down and wrestle with her anymore, so he returned the hug, turning it into an embrace. “Hey, yourself,” he almost stammered, struck by how much like Kathy she had grown up to be. Finally, he put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back.

“So, you are... Taylor, right? Your mother told me a lot about you, but...”

“It’s Tyler... Tyler,” she said, playing along. “And you’re my mother’s friend?”

“Yes. I’m Robert. Robert Curry.”

“Like the spice.” They had exchanged this kind of silly banter ever since she learned to talk.

“Yes,” Robert lobbed back, “I’m very spicy.”

“Funny.” The smile fell away. “Okay, I’m tired of that,” she said, pulling back and heading to her room. She stopped half-way up the stairs. “I’m going to cheerleading. Save some dinner.”

“Do you want me to drive you?” Curry yelled after her.

She stooped down so she could see into the kitchen. “Why? Are you taking my car away?”

He realized there would be a lot to get used to.

After Tyler went to bed, so did Robert and Kathy. The passion that had built up for so many years of longing and hunger just exploded. Both were exhausted. Robert couldn’t remember ever being this happy and satisfied.

“That was... nice,” Kathy said as she started to drift off.

Robert chuckled. “It was okay.”

“night.”

Curry couldn't sleep. He sat in the familiar semi-darkness of his study, thinking over the past, the complexities of having lived through two complete lifetimes and a short, but critical, third one. How much he had learned and experienced: the extreme fear of combat in Vietnam; the satisfaction of building a multi-billion dollar business; the challenges of the war with Matsimoto and Hayama; the intensity of innovation and brilliance. He thought about the suffering of betrayal and stupidity and mistakes; running for the Presidency and the total failure of his mission the first time, then the success of his mission the second—it all ran together. He felt exhausted, but not tired.

He sipped his Scotch, lost in the past when his eyes came to rest on the beat-up guitar in the corner. *How much fun it was*, he remembered. Music had come so easily in his second life; the guitar and singing were mastered through the enhancements his Master Entity had given him. His intelligence levels had been expanded as well. With a perfect memory, he had been able to reconstruct every important event in his future and use it to prosper and gain power.

Curry went over and picked up the instrument, his hands moving almost instinctively to the right places. To his utter amazement, his fingers seemed to detach and fly across the strings. He suddenly put it down and backed away a couple of steps as if it were possessed. Then, after a few minutes, he went back and started again. The music that came out was exceptional. *How the hell is this happening?*

He tried singing softly. Fifteen minutes of glorious musical expression later, he sat back in his stuffed chair. His heart was beating quickly with excitement, but there was an undercurrent of apprehension.

Why do I still have this enhancement?

Being in front of a class returned to him easily, but there were differences. Where he remembered clinically talking about historical events and people, he didn't remember bringing them to life as he did now; where he had made history sound black and white, he found that he could somehow paint it with brilliant colors and engaging insights.

As he headed to his office, Curry turned to see one of his students hurrying to catch up.

“Professor Curry?”

“Yes, Mr. Buchanan?”

“Excuse me, sir. The comparison between Hitler and Napoleon blew me away. How do you come up with that stuff?”

He wanted to answer honestly, but couldn't. In fact, he didn't know for sure where it came from. Like so many things that surprised him since he entered this timeline, his brain just generated brilliance on its own. “Weird, isn't it? So much of their important milestones occurred about 129 years apart, sometimes to the day: birth, coming to power, invading Russia, being defeated. There might be some mysterious link somewhere.”

“I never read that anywhere before,” the student said. “I hope to know all of this like you do. I hadn't considered teaching PS, but now I am. Do you have a secret?”

“Not really. It just pops into my head. Sorry.”

After thanking the young man—who obviously expected a better answer—Robert returned to his little office, deep in thought. *The enhancements certainly are not gone.*

The critical question stomped on his conscious mind again: *Why?*

CHAPTER 5

It was a serious case of déjà vu: He found himself back where it had started eight years ago —actually thirty-eight years if you count the time shifts he experienced—at lunch with Dr. Winston Dominion, the Dean of the Philosophy Department.

“Professor Curry,” he said in his typically pompous manner, “I wanted to know if you’d consider presenting your *Theory on the Nature of Existence* to the students. Your paper has created some stir and a lot of people have indicated they would like to attend.”

Curry’s head swelled momentarily as the complexities of time travel and all he had been through began to rush into it. The problem at this point? It was no longer a theory.

Robert firmly proved to himself and Richard Combs that existence—in both its physical and non-physical formats like human qualities such as fear, intelligence, love, hate and greed—is entirely composed of and generated from tangible matter. The core of his theory stated that all the tangible matter existing today existed at the beginning of time in the form of millions of individual physical Entities. Each was a functioning individual but part of an active and interactive community.

Curry had postulated that, at some point, the members of that community decided they were, for lack of a better word, bored, so they proposed and accepted the idea of holding a competition. Rules were drawn and plans made. Each Entity would break apart into their own space—into what are now called ‘galaxies’—and try to create civilizations. The first one to achieve the primary goals, goals which were still unknown to Curry, was the winner.

But Curry did confirm one rule: *don’t let the creation destroy itself*. And he also had learned another rule for certain: *You can choose a game piece to facilitate change*. This was Curry’s role, then Combs’, then Curry’s again, then Combs’.

One suspected rule might be perhaps the most important: that a competitor could create its own game piece to interfere with another Entity's game piece. From this rule, Curry believed, came the concept of Good and Evil, maybe even Right and Wrong.

Curry's Master Entity had appeared to Robert Curry in a mist just as the Earth was about to destroy itself. At that point, a time-travel adventure of epic proportions began, an adventure with pain and humiliation and trial and triumphs and betrayal enough for a hundred lifetimes. But Curry defeated an opposing game piece placed in his world by one of his Master Entity's competitors. Because of that struggle, the world now seemed to be settled and no longer in danger.

"So, what do you say, Robert?" Dr. Dominion's face was eager. "It should gather a lot of interest outside our campus, too. I already talked to Harvard about publishing it."

Giving this speech in his first life had sparked a series of events which had consumed him. "Winston," Curry said slowly. "I believe we should let the paper stand by itself."

And fade away, he wanted to add. But fading away was not going to happen. Not in this lifetime either.

CHAPTER 6

Two weeks also passed quickly for Abdullah. He met Khalid every day to review all that had happened in this new history, all the complex deals they had made, all the investors they had acquired, the successful businesses they had backed. His personal life was, by comparison, easy to explain. Except for the expensive apartment in London and many beautiful possessions, there *was* no personal life. He hadn't married or even encountered a suitable woman. His sister and parents were dead, and he had no close friends. He appeared to be, in a word: barren. Business was apparently the only thing that mattered.

Everything he learned about the seven years before May 13 of 2000—the history in which he now found himself—was foreign and so different than the years he had actually lived through. Apparently, by using the foreknowledge given to Khalid by Allah, they had succeeded dramatically.

Khalid's days of foresight were over; it was Abdullah's turn to use the wealth of information about the next sixteen years to take the mission to another level.

"I remember nothing of the future years you say I lived through," Abdullah said. "What did you remember from your original years?"

"Nothing at first, but as time went on, facts and recollections of political and financial events came to me. Nothing personal."

They were sitting in Khalid's study at his surprisingly modest flat in Islington.

"I see subtle differences," Abdullah was saying. "Products, for example. One of the first things I noticed was that my monitor was made by Combs. I vividly remembering ordering monitors made by Matsimoto."

Khalid put his drink down with a start. "What?"

"I bought monitors made by Matsimoto, but when I transitioned, I saw they were made by Combs. Is that important?"

“The name Matsimoto is familiar to me,” Khalid said, shaking his head. “Before I started living our first shared history, Matsimoto was the world’s largest manufacturer of electronics. When Allah returned me to 1993, I also noticed that. I only saw the Combs brand, and it was like Matsimoto never existed.”

Abdullah tried to organize the threads of the tattered fabric of time shifts. “My brain hurts,” he said, finally.

Khalid laughed. “Believe me, I understand.”

“So, now Matsimoto is entirely gone, and Richard Combs is President of the United States.”

“Yes.”

Abdullah pondered this confusing maze of facts and twists. “There is much we don’t know.”

“We can never comprehend the full extent of Allah’s plan. We must only fulfil the roles required of us.” Khalid shifted his weight and placed the fat folder down on the table. “Now. We need to talk about the future,” he said.

“I agree. I believe I have absorbed all that I have to about the current business, but we have a larger mission.”

Khalid rose and walked to the window, deep in thought. After a few moments, he returned to the desk and took his seat again. “When we first met, I mentioned a test. I believe you are ready.”

“What is it?”

“This is Thursday. Tomorrow you will raise cash. Sell our positions in American companies and buy puts on the stocks most volatile to negative world events.”

“We can’t sell it all in one day. The Exchange will notice.”

“I know, but you will sell as much as possible without attracting too much attention. I believe \$120 million will be sufficient. When the stock market reacts you will buy back in and exercise the puts.”

“What negative event? Can you still see the future?”

“No. I see the present.” Khalid leaned forward. “Abdullah, understand that if you do this, many people, many infidels, will die a violent death.”

Abdullah stopped short and inhaled sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Your actions tomorrow will trigger the negative event, which has been arranged. You must decide if you can plunge the sword for Allah or not. Our masters must know.”

Abdullah’s heart was drumming in his chest now as he wiped newly-formed sweat from his brow. The theory of being an important warrior for Islam had been easy to accept. The reality would take time. As he sorted through the scattered bits of thoughts, terrible and grand, the stronger ones began to surface.

Two minutes of torturous examination had passed in silence. “I am ready.”

Khalid nodded. “I have arranged a meeting with two men on Tuesday night. One is the investor who gave us the initial funds to start our firm.”

“Omar bin Qahtan?” Abdullah asked.

“Yes, but he is much more than a wealthy Saudi prince who needed to find somewhere to put his money. He represents the third partner in our mission. We will also meet a man whose name we are not allowed to learn.”

Abdullah was puzzled. “Why?”

“I don’t question the rules. And neither will you. This meeting is to decide the shape of the future and establish our roles in it.”

The congregation had started to form early for the beginning of the 11:00 service. No one had noticed the Middle Eastern man who returned to the site after work wrapped up the previous Friday. And if they had, they probably would not have questioned why he was dragging a heavy canvas duffel bag up the ladder.

That duffel bag and that man were now sitting on the scaffolding directly over the center of the Nave, and directly over the seat that unofficially belonged to Terry Jamison, the President’s Advisor on Islamic Terrorism. In the man’s hand was a simple switch. Wires ran from it into the duffel bag. The man was calmly rocking back and forth, eyes closed, whispering prayers and reciting from the Qur’an.

When he heard the Pastor begin the sermon, the man took a deep breath and stood, pulling an electric bullhorn from the planks and raising it to his mouth.

“Praise Allah! This is the beginning,” he shouted. His words reverberated through the plastic sheet and off of the partially rebuilt plaster ceiling and into the hearts of the stunned people below.

“Allahu Akbar!” he screamed as he kicked the package over the edge and pressed the button.

Seventy-eight men, women, and children were incinerated instantly. Another twenty-three survived but were in critical condition. The nation was shocked and frightened to the core. The stock market opened almost 8% lower the next morning.

Late the following Tuesday, Khalid and Abdullah left London in Khalid’s Jaguar, driving northwest for about an hour, following directions slid under the door at Abdullah’s flat. The roads became more and more obscure until they found themselves on what appeared to be a long tree-lined driveway. After five minutes, the headlights picked up the open entry gate of an elegant stone mansion overgrown with ivy. When they reached the courtyard, there was only one other car parked there: a heavy black Mercedes. A single light shone from inside the house.

Khalid put his hand on Abdullah’s arm as he shut off the engine. “Before we go in, you must understand something. I do not know if anyone but Omar is aware of *how* we acquire our knowledge, certainly nothing of our history shifts, our time travel, or our ability to foresee the future. They may only know that we are great visionaries and capable of producing huge investment gains. What we also share is the fervent desire to crush the infidels and install Islam as the primary religion and culture of the world.”

Abdullah smiled inwardly as he envisioned a pure Islamic world. “I understand. It is Allah’s will.”

“Yes. I have never been told the full extent of the mission or its strategy. All I have been told was to anticipate the attack in Maryland.

They know the profits from your actions were enormous and that the mechanisms will work. The long-term plan will be new to me as well,” Khalid said as they exited the car.

Khalid and Abdullah stood on the grand porch for a minute after ringing the bell. A small but tightly muscled man opened the oaken door then directed them to the library. The creaking of the old wood floor was the only sound as they entered the darkened room.

“Omar, As-salamu alaikum,” Khalid said as he embraced a squat man in flowing traditional Saudi dress. Omar turned to Abdullah and took his hand. “Thank you for coming.”

Two other men sat in the ornate study, but neither rose to greet the newcomers. One was a stout man, dressed in Western business clothing. The other was very tall with a full black beard covering his long face. His deep, penetrating dark eyes seemed to glow. Dressed in simple Arab dress, he just nodded then motioned for them to sit.

“Abdullah, we acknowledge your recent commitment to Islam. You have done well,” the very tall man said as they settled into the pair of tufted oxblood leather couches. Like Khalid, his voice was rich and full and comforting. “The infidels are on notice.” He waved his hand. “That is behind us. Now, we are prepared to enter the next phases of our mission. Much will fall on your shoulders. Let us discuss the future.”

“We are ready to fulfil Allah’s plan,” Abdullah said, bowing his head in respect. Images of children being burned to death flashed across his eyes, and a heavy load of guilt passed through his heart. But it passed as the very tall man started speaking.

As they absorbed the plans and the responsibilities that he laid out, they were overwhelmed by its brilliance, scope, and the sheer enormity. The stout man remained dispassionate.

Khalid sat quietly for a moment after the very tall man finished, almost breathless, trying to control his emotions. The mission filled him with such pride and clarity that he felt inflated. As he studied the deeply rich crossed-beam ceiling, he tried to collect his thoughts. “To be a part of this... It is...,” he fought for words, “ambitious and magnificent.”

The very tall man smiled thinly and nodded.

Khalid's analytical mind attempted to take over. "The technical side is certainly possible. We just have to identify the companies and technology that will insure success. The detailed planning is going to be complex, but your goals are clear."

Abdullah spoke. "Yes, the mechanical parts are possible. But how will we control..."

"We now have every confidence that you will perform your responsibilities, my friend, but controlling the essential companies, technologies, and infrastructure is *our* responsibility," the very tall man said, quickly. "You provide the money and advice on timing and tactics that we should consider. We will design and execute the grand strategy. You allow us to pay for the weapons we put together; pulling the trigger is our duty. Omar and a man named Sayeed are your contacts in London. They are the connections between your work and the operational side."

Abdullah nodded. "I understand. The difficult part, of course, is finding the man for the third role inside America. Much depends on that. How can we...?"

"Don't worry about that, either," the very tall man said with an impatient wave of his hand. "We have identified him, and he has already been approached. He is committed to the mission and to Islam. His personal ambition is going to drive his compliance with the plan. During his tenure of power, he will weaken America to the point where it is scattered and ineffective, yet supportive. Our people will easily achieve the final triumph."

"May we know who this man is?"

Omar leaned forward. "No, but it will become evident in time. Now we must prepare for the second event, a warning to the Dar al-Kharb. Your American friends would call it a 'wake-up call'."

"Yes," Khalid said, smiling broadly. "They will certainly be awakened to a new reality. Al-hamdu lillah."

"Insha'Allah. I pray for a global Dar al-Islam."

CHAPTER 7

The same two weeks passed quickly for Curry as well. He was simultaneously happy and disturbed by the fact that his life hadn't changed to any great degree. Except for an investment account that rivaled the total economy of more than a few small countries, his life looked pretty much as it did at this point in his original history. In a word, it seemed dull, marvelously dull on one hand. Living with Kathy and Tyler, in reality, was comfortable and almost overpowering in its warmth and reward, but after the hysteria of the days before the final transformation, 'dull' was welcomed.

To a point. There was something missing: He had become accustomed to the challenges and activity of the Robert Curry he had been in his second history. Part of him—a big part—longed for the power and the prestige and the heavy demands business and the Presidency brought. Founding and building the Renaissance Corporation from an idea to a multi-billion dollar global enterprise had been exhilarating. He and Richard Combs grew it together, and it allowed him the power and money necessary to defeat his enemy.

He missed that rush, he finally admitted. But that world only existed now in the memories that he and Richard shared. Richard had built Renaissance again in the current history the same way Curry had, but Curry had no recollection of that. He would have to deal with the current world, and the challenge of adjusting was daunting enough—it would have to do for now.

Introducing his musical prowess into his world was easier than he thought it would be. Although he had played the guitar, he didn't remember playing very well. The commitment to improving his skill slowly was buoyed by friends and family who were amazed at his progress. In a couple of months, he hoped he could stop fumbling with the strings and return to his previous level of proficiency. Singing was

easier to cover. He just started singing, and everybody supported that, too. They simply hadn't known one way or another.

Covering his enhanced intelligence was harder than he thought it would be, however. Apparently, to his dismay, he had not been seen as the greenest leaf on the tree. That was changing as he got more involved in the academic discussions that swirled around the college campus. For the conservative Republican he had become, the excruciating liberalism was mind-warping. He used his powers of persuasion more than once to modify some of the unrealistic thinking shared by colleagues he had once considered 'brilliant'; they seemed so empty and uninformed now. His ability to analyze what people were saying and then ruthlessly tear them apart with clear logic was becoming quite legendary—if three weeks of this could produce a legend. Professors started conversations with him just to get a different perspective on things. It was, as Tyler would say, 'awesome'.

When Curry considered the complications of his sudden language skills, he knew there would be more pressing challenges. How could he explain knowing how to speak eight languages fluently?

He made a note to start an aggressive program of taking classes in what would most likely become the most critical one, Arabic. Like his musical proficiency, hopefully, his rapid growth would be attributed to undiscovered intellectual gifts. He hoped so.

But, at the core remained the question: *Why did he still have the enhancements if the game was over?*

It had only taken a month to engage fully with his environment and adapt to his new self. One night he was helping Tyler with homework when the phone rang.

"Robert, Richard," the familiar voice said. "It goes well?"

"Glad you called. Yes, it is going very well. I have..."

"We need to talk," Richard interrupted, strangely serious.

Curry straightened; he didn't like the tone. He looked at his daughter. "I can't talk right now, Richard. Can I you call back?"

“Understood. Listen, I’m going to give you an address. Can you meet me there Friday night at 11 pm?”

Curry picked up a pen and wrote it down although he was certain it would be imbedded in his brain automatically. “You’re scaring me a little. What’s going on?”

“We have to synchronize and organize,” Richard said.

Curry laughed nervously then stood and moved to the kitchen, lowering his voice. “That’s our Renaissance-speak. I thought you had forgotten all that. What’s this about?”

“I can’t talk, either. Just meet me there.”

“Okay,” Curry then looked back at Tyler, again hard at work at the dining room table. “And there’s something I need to talk to you about, too.”

Friday came, and Robert headed downtown. The address belonged to a small brick townhouse on a tree-lined street southeast of Union Station. Only one car was outside. He parked and as he walked up the short sidewalk, several men in black trench coats appeared, seemingly out of vapor.

“I’m Robert Curry. I have an appointment.”

“Confirmed,” one of the men said into his sleeve. “Go right in, sir.” As quickly as they appeared, they were gone.

The door opened before he could knock. Daniels smiled and motioned him inside.

“Robert!” Richard greeted him in the hallway. The wooden floor squeaked as they embraced; the old brownstone had seen better days. But still, it had character.

Curry looked around at the elegant dark cherry wood paneling. “A safe house? Isn’t this a little dramatic?”

“You wouldn’t believe the things that Presidents did here.”

“I probably would,” Curry replied as they headed to the study. “How come nobody told me about this when I was POTUS?”

“Need-to-know, I guess. You didn’t need to know.”

“Apparently,” Curry said abstractly as they walked into the room and closed the heavy door.

Combs motioned to a deeply upholstered chair by the fireplace. “Sit down. Yes, it is a bit covert, but you and I have things to discuss that can’t be overheard. We couldn’t explain our history.”

“I know.”

Combs went to the cabinet and poured two tall Scotches, bringing one to Curry. “Sorry for the intrigue, but I’m just cautious.”

“You’re right.” Curry took a sip of his drink. “Listen, Richard. I’m so sorry about Terry. I know he was a friend. Terrible coincidence.”

“Not a coincidence.” Combs said as he sat in the opposing chair and lifted his Scotch. “I’m thinking he was the target.”

Curry looked up with a start. “Target?”

“The Advisor on Islamic terror killed by a Middle Eastern man screaming ‘Allahu Akbar’? In a church?”

Curry nodded. “I see what you mean.”

“There’s something else. We have managed to control it, but survivors reported him also shouting ‘this is not the last’, or something like that, in English.”

“Jesus. There’s going to be more?”

“We have to assume so. Terry told me that these people are truly evil.”

“Evil.” Curry rolled that around in his mind. “Good against Evil.” He looked up at his friend. “Sound familiar?”

“It does. We have to develop some sort of plan.”

Curry cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “For what?”

“Indeed. That’s the first question: what are we planning for?”

“You’re not making any sense, pal.”

“I have been thinking about the last history, trying to understand where it could logically go from here. But I’m having trouble getting a grip on anything.” He leaned back and crossed his legs. “The second, and most major, question is this: is it over?”

Curry nodded and continued the thought: “...or has another phase begun?”

“Exactly. It truly could be over. We won. They gave up. That’s one conclusion.”

Curry sank farther into the chair and studied his friend's face. "You don't believe it."

"Frankly, I don't know what to believe," Richard said. "Would they just admit defeat so easily? It doesn't seem like they would. It seems as though there should be another inning. What if College Park was the first pitch."

"Remember the Master Entity's words? 'Look to yourself to understand me'. When I do, I think that I would not have given up so fast." Curry looked up at the ornate stamped-tin ceiling then continued. "There's something else: why do we still have memories of what we went through? If we really won, and the game is over, wouldn't we just be living in this history? It doesn't make sense to know the past unless it is preparation for the future. Yet, we don't see future events." He pondered his Scotch. "I'm confused, but maybe we shouldn't assume it is over."

"Exactly," Richard said. "To be safe, let's start with that assumption. But, and it's a big *but*, we have to be certain. Is there another player, another round? We should believe there are dangerous things afoot. And we need to find out what."

Curry nodded his head. "As you say, it's safer to assume it is not over."

"I do. So, what do we look for and how do we look for it?"

Curry swirled his drink for a moment. "Two things come to mind. First, the goal of another player must be as expansive as Matsimoto's."

"World domination."

"Yes. But the player would have to either be already extremely powerful or be gaining power in a dramatic and rapid manner. Whichever, we should be able to identify potential adversaries through research."

Richard leaned into the coffee table space and put his elbows on his knees. "To be clear, we are assuming financial and political domination, correct?"

"I think so. The likely and obvious suspect is someone in China or Russia. They would operate for the benefit of themselves and their country as did Matsimoto."

“I agree, but we have to look outside that damn box everybody keeps talking about. Here’s the deal: Let’s not make any conclusions about the fundamental motivations. It may be a completely different game, a different goal. I mean, we didn’t start out knowing shit about our competitor the first time. Why would we be allowed to understand who and what it is now?”

“Either we know, or we don’t,” Curry said with a chuckle.

“As usual,” Combs laughed, “you really pinned it down.” He drained his glass, set it down on the coffee table and looked up at Robert. “Look, whatever the goal, he—or they—still need significant assets to gain the financial and political power to succeed. That’s still a prerequisite. Agreed?”

Richard rubbed his chin. “Agreed. That’s where we try to find him. I can’t be much help as President, Bob. Everything I do and say is under such intense scrutiny. Well, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Really? You forget I was in your shoes?”

“For about ten minutes, before you blew it.”

“Blew it? *I* blew it?” Curry was halfway out of his chair when he saw the smile cross Combs’ face, and he settled back down. “You’re still an asshole, Dickey,” Curry said, coughing up a laugh.

“You called the President of the United States an asshole.”

“What, are you going to have me shot?”

“Thinking about it.”

They chuckled. “You know that we will always be buddies as well as friends, right?” Curry said.

“Right.”

“When you’re an asshole, I’ll tell you. No amount of fancy-pants will change that.”

“I probably need that. Just don’t do it in public.”

“The Democrats can handle that.” Curry shifted his weight and stared at the Remington statue in the corner. His expression deepened.

Combs noticed. “Oh, boy, Robert. I know that look. What is it?”

It was time for Curry to share his revelations, and fears. “I can play the guitar. Really well. And sing. Again, really well.”

“What are you talking about? You can’t do that.”

“Not in my original history, no. But you remember our second history? I am just as good now as I was then.”

Combs stared at him for a moment, eyes narrowed. “Are you saying you didn’t lose your enhancements?”

“I can think things through as well as I did, too. Frankly, sometimes I’m so brilliant I scare myself. I seem to still have most of the enhancements the Master Entity gave me. And I am still able to speak eight languages like I grew up with them.”

“How can that be?”

Curry paused for a moment. “The only thing missing is the ability to foresee or remember future events.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Richard said, leaning forward. “Unless...”

“Unless we’re right and the game is still on. Then there’s a good reason for it. Otherwise...”

They churned all of this over and over for another half-hour before Curry got up to leave.

Richard took his hand in the foyer. “Let’s start poking around. You remember Bill Wilcox at Renaissance? He’s still there. I’ll tell him you’ll be asking for help. He knows to comply without raising questions. Whatever you do, do it quietly.”

“Of course.” Curry turned toward the door then had a thought. “Mike Daggett. Where is he?”

“In prison.”

“What?”

“He chose a different path this time. He didn’t have a Robert Curry to pull him out of the neighborhood, and he went back to his roots. Organized crime.”

“Damn. He was a good man.”

“Except for the murders and the intimidation.”

Curry shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah. There was that.” He nodded, opened the door, and headed to Woodbridge, his mind whirring with questions, options—and anxiety.

“Bill Wilcox.” The voice seemed familiar.

“Bill, this is Robert Curry. President Combs told me you would know I was calling.”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “I have been expecting your call. How can I help?”

“Could you carve out an hour for me, please?”

“Whenever you want, sir.”

They met at a coffee shop. “Bill, I don’t want this to sound like a huge assignment, but the President and I need someone to look for a person, or a firm, that has been making exceedingly lucky calls in the financial markets. I can’t tell you why. If you can point us to some private research people you trust, we’d be very grateful.”

Wilcox didn’t blink at the mention of a clandestine mission for the President of the United States. Curry wondered how often this sort of thing had happened. “I understand, sir,” Wilcox said. “I think I know just the guy.”

“Good. Have him report directly to me.”

CHAPTER 8

1948, Kenya

The hot, sandy dust that billowed from behind the speeding Mercedes settled over Issa Hashim Khalfani as he knelt next to the hard dirt road. It was the main motorway that led north to ‘Happy Valley’, the refuge for the wealthy white people who had been financially raping Kenya and its native population for years, squeezing every ounce of resources for themselves and their British masters. Since the World War ended, it had gotten worse. The Meru-Nairobi Highway also led, in the other direction, to Makuyu, the desperately poor home to Issa and 2,000 other black Swahili Muslims. Beyond that, farther to the south, lay Nairobi, which was only a vague concept to Issa. At twelve years old, he didn’t really understand much of the world, except that his people were always hungry, always thirsty, and had to scrape bits of sustenance and joy from their barren existence.

Issa had been obeying the call to prayer as the big black Mercedes passed, its occupants yelling “Hey, Islam! Eat some pig shit while you’re bent over!” The white people in the car all laughed at that and quickly rolled up their windows, trying to keep the poverty-tainted dust from damaging the symbol of their privileged lifestyle.

Issa tried to concentrate, but couldn’t push aside his hatred and anger. He wanted them dead, and he didn’t reject feeling that way. The Qur’an and Sunnah, at least in his interpretation of the words, had authorized their removal. It was clear: Infidels must convert or die. How dare they insult the only true religion and the pure exercise of devotion to it? He knew that someday they would pay for their sins. He also knew he would be there to help make sure they did. It made him feel better.

As Issa grew to manhood, his hatred of white people, both Christians and Jews—especially Jews—matured as well, and he gravitated towards others who felt the same way. Gbomo Kenyatta came into his life as Issa entered his twenty-second year. Kenyatta preached reforms, reforms that included spreading the nation's wealth into the hands of the poor instead of being focused on the wealthy. It was not popular with the ruling British and the small clique of coffee barons, of course, but it gained powerful strength among the oppressed black population.

Tall and handsome, Issa had an impressive presence. When he started speaking in public, he discovered he had the ability to make people listen and agree. The more he influenced them, the stronger he became. But, the stronger he became, the more visible he was. He devoted his skill and energy to the Mau Mau uprising which was trying to install Gbomo Kenyatta as the national leader. It failed. When Kenyatta was imprisoned in early 1960, Issa barely avoided capture himself but continued to speak out against the British domination.

Also in 1960, he had met and fell in love with an unlikely woman: a fair-skinned white American named Marsha Whitley, who came to teach school to the impoverished children of central Kenya. Hopelessly entranced by her unselfish devotion to the oppressed, he proposed marriage under the distant image of Mount Kenya. She accepted.

In 1961, two important events occurred: first, Kenyatta was released and the process toward the end of British control began. Secondly, in August of 1961, Issa had a child, who he named Gbomo Hashim ('destroyer of evil') Khalfani (Swahili-Muslim for 'destined to rule'). Little Gbomo, Issa was convinced, would be the salvation of his Kenyan people.

As the boy grew, Issa taught him three important things: a devotion to and love of Islam, hatred for privileged and arrogant white people, and the righteousness of taking from the rich to help the poor live better lives. Gbomo was very bright, easily learning American English from his mother and Arabic from his father.

The boy absorbed all the fevered political messages in speeches delivered by Issa, and he came to associate those messages with his father's love and the love of Islam. No matter how much Issa tried to protect Gbomo from the abuses he had suffered as he grew, Gbomo constantly bore the humiliation that the remaining white people would throw at him, the angry insults and degradation that caused him to understand and internalize the lessons of hate his father spread.

"But, Mother is white. Is she bad?" the boy had asked one day.

Issa leaned very close. "Son. It will be safer if you expect white people to be bad and abusive. But some are not. Your mother is the exception. Anyone who cares for the poor and struggling as much as she does is a good person. Allah loves her as we do. Listen to me, Gbomo: assume they are bad but always look for the good in everyone."

It was a complicated message, but he could then justify loving his mother. Her race would always remain a barrier to loving her deeply, but he no longer felt like he had to choose.

In 1967, his mother decided to return to Seattle; the political unrest had grown too dangerous in Kenya. Her intent was to prepare a stable American life for little Gbomo then bring him back.

One day when Gbomo was eight, he stood in a crowd of Kenyatta supporters, listening to his father speak. A large car roared into the city square and swerved into the people, scattering the entranced audience and ending up next to his startled father. Four young white men shouted terrible things as Gbomo watched. They insulted Islam and his father. Then to Gbomo's disbelief, a shotgun emerged from the open rear window. As his father's head disappeared into a mist of blood and hair, the white men laughed and sped off, spewing clouds of dust into the crowd of shocked believers. The image of his father's head exploding would be etched in Gbomo's mind forever.

Over the next few weeks, Gbomo grieved and became cold; his father's words came to him often, and the messages turned into commandments. His mother returned to Makuyu and took Gbomo back to Seattle. Gbomo left Kenya forever, but he pledged never to

leave behind his father's beliefs and to always hold his father's memory and his love of Islam closer than ever.

Gbomo's mother changed his name to John Hashim Calfani. It had not been done legally; she just started using it, and soon it became simply accepted.

John adapted quickly to American life; even at the young age of nine, he realized that he had to fit in with the very people he had sworn to hate. He learned to suppress his desire to pray and worship Allah openly; it was not accepted in Christian society. Since he was light-skinned, he could 'act' white and downplay, but not disavow, his father's African heritage. He knew it would be important to become an integral part of the world he had pledged to destroy. 'Real change comes more easily from within,' his father had often said. John came to understand and accept that statement deeply.

His mother died unexpectedly when John was twelve. Although he felt sadness, he was not overcome with grief as he had been at his father's death; he loved his mother, but in a very surface, almost obligatory, way. Martha's mother was John's only relative, so he moved to Chicago and started a new life.

In Chicago, he met one of his grandmother's friends, Bashir Al-Assad. It seemed like an unlikely friendship, John had often thought. Bashir and his grandmother seemed to have nothing in common, but as they came to know each other better, he became more and more of a permanent fixture in the boy's life.

Bashir was also a devout Muslim, and soon John found it easy to open up his secrets about his true past and his own love of Islam.

"It is not popular to be a Muslim, Gbomo," Bashir told John. "You can't gain enough power to make a difference if you are Muslim. Not yet. You must continue to believe in secret. Someday, when you have the power to do so, you can emerge."

Bashir was a squat man with a full, rich beard, and for John, he epitomized the Muslim man he desperately wanted to become. His father's messages and Bashir's mixed together and John came to

believe that to make a difference and avenge his father's death he must gain strength and power.

The years passed quickly, and John Calfani grew into a tall and handsome young man with a powerful and engaging charisma like his father. But, again, unexpected events would change his life. His grandmother died two weeks after he graduated from high school. As with his mother, he felt very little sorrow. A critical concern emerged, however: he was now on his own, totally without her support. Although his superior grades and test scores gave him some notoriety in universities, he knew he couldn't afford to attend anything but a state school. He had applied to and been accepted at his first choice, Northwestern, but, they only offered a partial scholarship; it wouldn't be enough.

"I have to go to UI," he told Bashir sadly.

"Let us pray," the man answered.

For the next hour, they prayed and talked about John's passions and visions. Bashir sat back on the couch and folded his hands. "Gbomo, you know I have come to love you and respect you. I promise that you will never be alone. You will go to Northwestern. I want you to consider this path: study law and become a politician. Being a part of the government is the only way to make the changes you want to make."

John nodded vigorously. "Change from within. This is what I want. But, how?"

"I will worry about that. Do you accept this mission?"

"Mission?" John was confused.

Bashir took Gbomo's hand and talked calmly for the next twenty minutes about an endeavor, a calling that would change the world by serving Allah. The goals filled Gbomo's heart.

When Bashir finished, it didn't take John long to decide; it was the plan he had thought about many nights as he tried to sleep. If being a politician would gain him the power to pursue his beliefs, then that

would be his destiny. He had no passion for the law, but if it was a requirement, he would do whatever it took to succeed.

“Yes,” John said as tears streamed down his face, “the infidels must be overcome, and the rich man must pay. If the power to do that comes from politics, then I will devote my life to that pursuit.”

Late that night as Bashir sat alone in his house, thinking through all that he learned about Gbomo Khalfani, he came to his own decision.

The phone was answered immediately in a room thousands of miles away. “Yes?”

“I have found him.”

CHAPTER 9

More years passed as John Calfani grew and prospered. One day, Bashir called and set a meeting. “We must talk about the reporter, Mr. Grimley.”

The moon shone brightly in the deep blue night sky when John arrived. Two men waited huddled quietly on a shadowy bench in Chicago’s Hyde Park area. Bashir was as squat and bearded as John remembered, and the other, whom John did not know, was tall and dark and terribly thin. As Gbomo sat, no introduction was offered.

Even at 10 o’clock at night, the heat felt oppressive, but that was not why John Calfani sweated. Speaking in Arabic, Bashir had just finished reviewing the topic of the meeting. Walter Grimley, a retired investigative reporter, had for some reason decided to investigate John Calfani’s background. Unfortunately for Mr. Grimley, he found incriminating evidence about John’s true identity. Fortunately for Bashir, he was a recluse, and none of the information had been disseminated... yet. It was the ‘yet’ that prompted drastic action.

“This would kill my political career,” John said. “I will lose my seat in the State House of Representatives. Perhaps deported.”

“Which we don’t want to happen any more than you do. That is why we have prepared to take care of it.”

John cocked his head. “How can this be fixed, my friend?”

Bashir nodded at the thin man. “My associates are powerful and resourceful. Mr. Grimley will have an accident.”

John recoiled slightly. “I can’t be a part of that, Bashir.”

The thin man spoke for the first time; his English revealed a heavy Syrian accent. “You won’t be. Everything we do will be completely transparent. Nothing points to you, and you know nothing of this. Is that clear?”

John tried to find further explanation in the man's eyes, but they were cold and dead. After a moment's hesitation, he replied, "Yes, of course."

The thin man pulled air into his impossibly sunken chest and smiled weakly. "Good. As a precaution, a concise history and supporting documents have been prepared that is in line with facts and the story your mother created long ago. Your father was Aldo Calfani, an Italian merchant in Nairobi and he died in a car accident in Kenya just after your mother became pregnant.

"Your mother moved to Seattle and died when you were twelve. We have placed a birth certificate that proves your birth to Marsha Whitley in Bend, Oregon in 1961. Everything, school records, and addresses, will indicate you grew up there. You moved to Chicago and were raised by your grandmother. She passed away in 1979."

John nodded. "Yes. That is correct."

Bashir put his hand on John's and spoke in English. "Your college career was financed by inheritance. You will never mention my name. This is critical."

John didn't question the reason. He just nodded.

"Good." The thin man handed John a thick file. "We have manufactured and placed old photographs and documents that support every point. You were a quiet boy, which is the reason few people would remember you. Keep the photographs and birth certificate, but then destroy the rest."

John took the folder, studied the cover for a moment then looked up. "Issa Khalfani was very visible in the late '50s and during the struggle to gain power for Kenyatta. It is not a stretch to see that 'Calfani' came from 'Khalfani'. How do we explain my real father if this all comes out?"

"I wish your mother had chosen a different name, but she did not. And yes, your father was very outspoken."

John bristled. "He was a great man, a visionary, and teacher."

The thin man raised his hand. "Yes. I'm sorry. What we found of him has been erased. Mr. Grimley uncovered much of the truth, however, but all of his documentation will be kept safe."

“But not destroyed?” It came out as more a statement than a question.

John Calfani stared at the thin man who had not blinked; he saw the message clearly in his flat black eyes: This was a pact made in hell and non-compliance would be not an option. But Calfani didn't care; the ultimate objective was magnificent.

Bashir broke the silence. “As for your religious beliefs and your passion for Islam, documents prove you were raised by your mother as a Catholic. You must cover your true calling. Continue to pray with your heart, not with your knees.”

“It will be difficult,” he replied.

“Yes, but remember the final goal: you will be a critical part of a glorious victory for Allah.”

“Yes.” Tears welled up in the young man's eyes, pushed by pride and emotion. “Insha'Allah.”

“Al-hamdu lillah.”

When the meeting ended, Bashir walked to a drug store several blocks away and entered a phone booth. The call was answered immediately.

“Yes?”

“It is done,” he said.

“He understands that we now control him, Bashir?”

“He does, but he is firmly committed to his duty. I have no concerns.”

“I will inform our friends.”

CHAPTER 10

Robert Curry was in that never-never land between sleep and awake, where things that were not real seemed very real, where shadows had flesh and flesh had no substance. It didn't last long; one of the shadows had spoken.

Curry sat straight up in bed, considering the message, rolling it over and over in his mind. He felt cold sweat forming as he reached for the cell phone and punched the number for Ronald Meagan.

"Curry?" the sleepy voice asked.

"Richard. We should to get together and talk. Something has come up."

There was a pause. "You couldn't have waited for at least 5 am?"

"What I thought of scared me."

"Okay. I'll have Sharon set up a time."

Curry climbed into the huge limousine as it pulled up to the designated corner, preceded and followed by a Suburban.

"There would be less danger if they just let me drive a Prius by myself."

"I feel your pain."

"Anyway, I'm on my way to Baltimore to say something to some people... I don't even remember who, or why. Thank God for Teleprompters. We have about 45 minutes."

"They don't like it when you insist on the limo, do they?"

"No, they don't. Now, what the hell is so urgent?"

Curry pushed the button that closed the partition between them and the driver. He then flipped a very well hidden switch. “Turning off the recording device.”

Richard laughed. “I forgot about that.”

“I did not.”

“Now we’re in the most protected sound booth in the world. They are going to freak.”

“You deserve privacy.” Curry sat back into the deep leather seats. He was sure it was the same car he had when he was President, a lifetime, a dimension, a few months ago in his mind. “I had a dream.”

“You’re channeling Martin Luther King now?”

“This is serious, Richard. This illusion asked me a question. It said: *‘Can you be a player if you can’t see the future?’*”

Richard Combs considered his words then shook his head. “What do you think that meant?”

“I’ve been going over this a lot more since our first discussion. When we were competing for our Master Entity, we had all the memories of the future. I felt like I was actually playing a game using the most important game piece I had, which was knowledge of what was going to happen. We don’t have that now.”

Combs watched the city go past through the window, occasionally catching the eye of a citizen he was charged with protecting. “So? What are you thinking?”

“We have some left-over enhanced intelligence and abilities, but, no vision, no foresight. We are just... us.”

The President turned to Curry. “We have memories.”

“Of the past. Is that a gift that will help us combat our enemies in the future?”

“No. We are flying blind this time.”

Curry leaned closer. “Richard, our knowledge of future events gave us the ultimate power. Without it, maybe we are not really players now.”

Combs looked out the window again and waved his hand. “So you’re saying that without foreknowledge, we can’t know where to look for enemies or plots against our world.” He waited a few seconds

before facing Curry again. “Are you saying we’re not playing the game?”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Well, if we aren’t playing the game,” Curry offered, “then it isn’t our responsibility to find enemies.”

“Interesting,” Richard looked for the right words. “Or there *are* no enemies. Maybe there isn’t a real threat. Maybe there is no game. Maybe it’s over. But maybe not.”

“We keep going around in circles,” Curry said as he shook his head. “My brain is fried.”

“But, remember, after the College Park attack we agreed that it’s safer to assume there is a game. If there’s no threat, that would be great. If there is, we’ll be in a better position to spot it. That’s still valid.”

“And I still agree, but here’s my point,” Curry twisted on the black leather seat to face his friend squarely and continued, “if there *is* a game and we have only some of the weapons, wouldn’t that mean someone else has the other ones?”

“What?”

“If we assume there’s still a game, we must assume there is an opponent, right? It follows that to be safe, we should assume that our opponent has both weapons: foresight and abilities.”

“Okay.” Combs was struggling to line up the logic blocks.

Curry continued. “If that’s true, then we should have both weapons as well. If you and I don’t, then someone else must.”

“Wow. That’s convoluted. I’m not as smart as you are.” Combs scratched at some stubby whiskers on his cheek he missed while shaving and thought that through. “So, if there’s a game, we have a partner?”

“If there’s a game. Yes.” Robert paused a moment. “Maybe.”

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, his voice dripping with exasperation. “You’re killing me.”

The phone rang in Curry's study. He had been working on a new white paper on the intricacies of the post-war political structure of Germany. His head tried desperately to swim out of that pool. "Yes?"

"Mr. Curry, this is Clayton Long, with the MPR Group. Bill Wilcox is our common contact."

Robert fought for a moment to remember who the caller was. Then it clicked. "Oh, yes. Sorry. You're with the research group."

"Yes, sir. You hired us to look out for unusual activities, especially in the financial markets."

"Yes, yes I did. Sorry. My head was somewhere else."

"I found something I think you should see."

The MPR Group office was housed in a converted warehouse in the Inner Harbor district of Baltimore. It was old and brick and about as solid a building as a building could get, imposing and ornate, dating back to the days when it served to distribute illegal booze.

Clayton greeted him at the door. He was the quintessential frat boy and Ivy League Business School graduate. Medium height and blond, he wore an intensity in his eyes that was almost physical. He looked like every young bond trader Curry had ever known.

The conference room was like a stark modern jewel placed in an antique setting. The exposed brick walls had seen many intrigues over the years, Curry was certain.

"I love these offices," Curry said as he sat down. "Very elegant."

Clayton was accompanied by one other man, a dark Middle Eastern man in his early thirties. For the most part, he was average in appearance but possessed a hooked nose that legends could be built around. He was cranking up an overhead projector.

"This is Adnan Fakhari. He is our chief cyber technician."

"Cyber?" The term was familiar. "Like 'hacking'?"

"Right. Internet stuff. Adnan is responsible for analyzing data from all over the world and looking for the anomalies some of our clients want to be found. Cyber basically means all things related to data sent back and forth through Internet traffic."

“Okay.”

The room darkened as the drapes on the glass wall slid shut. Clayton pointed to the first slide that appeared; it was an unintelligible chart with a dozen jagged lines. “I know this looks crazy, but it is a graph of financial results of some of the world’s most active trading floors. Some are large, like Morgan Stanley, but some are much smaller. This line here,” he said, pointing to what looked like the edge of a saw blade, “tracks a London-based firm, Saalab Investments. Each of these spikes represents unusual activity according to your search criteria.”

“Salab? Like salad?”

“I’m not sure how they pronounce it, but I’m going with salad with a ‘b’.”

“Does it mean anything in Arabic?” Curry pointed the question toward Adnan. It didn’t ring a bell in his own memory.

“It’s not common, but it could be ‘fox’. Or, it might sound like a Fusha word for ‘stealing’.”

“Fusha?” Clayton asked.

“An ancient form of Arabic. Very classical.”

Curry shook his head. “‘Stealing’ is an odd choice for the name of an investment firm.”

“I agree.” Adnan touched a key that erased the other lines. Only the one for Saalab Investments remained. He stood and approached the screen, turning to and acknowledging Curry for the first time. “Let me explain.”

From his enhanced abilities and experience with languages, Curry noticed that Adnan spoke with a light Syrian accent.

“The upticks indicate when the firm bought stock or exercised options on a particular company that had reached its highest price. In every case, the stock price fell back and continues to fall.” Adnan clicked another key and a second line appeared. “This indicates when Saalab bought large puts or sold short at the same time they sold the stock long.”

Although Curry knew very well what it all meant, he asked, “meaning?”

Clayton stepped forward. “Selling the stock or exercising call options on a stock means they are taking profit from it going up in value. Buying put options or selling short are bets that it will go down. They pulled off this feat seven times in the last four months. Each transaction represents tens of millions of dollars of, basically, gambling profits. The risk of losing massive sums of money playing this game is huge. But Saalab confidently placed their bets. The rewards have been, or in the case of options, will be, extraordinary.”

Curry nodded. “So, they either manipulated the stocks, or they knew something nobody else knew?”

“Or they are consistently the luckiest stock pickers in history. Each position they sold continues to decline. The put options alone could be worth hundreds of millions.”

Curry scratched his head. “How did you spot this Saalab firm?”

“One of the analyst guys at the CIA that Bill arranged for us to work with. He’s a geek and knows the dot-com world pretty well.”

“Dot-com?”

“Tech stuff. Internet companies. This is an extremely volatile market for them with large and sudden ups and downs. The dot-coms are going crazy. That’s what Saalab is trading, mostly. Very few Fortune 500 plays, just pink sheets or NASDAQ.”

Curry scratched his chin then pushed a lock of his brown hair back up to the top of his forehead. “I don’t believe in consistent luck.”

“Nor do I. Anyway, I certainly didn’t expect to find any results like this so soon,” he waved at the screen. “But, here they are.”

“What do you think they are doing?”

“No idea. We just find information. Not explanations.” Clayton went to the window and sat on the wide sill, staring out at the office buildings in the distance. “Like you, I don’t believe in luck. Saalab has to have some inside information. But, how can anyone manipulate so many stocks without somebody catching on? I would think it’s impossible in this environment.”

Unless they already knew exactly when those stocks would become ripe. Curry’s skin itched. A new rash of uncertainty was growing.

“Look at this,” Adnan said as he pointed to the first major uptick in Saalab’s graph. “Does that date ring a bell?”

It took Curry a few seconds for it to be processed. “Jesus. That’s the day after the College Park attack.”

“I really don’t like this.” Richard was drumming his fingers on the table. “I don’t like this at all.”

They were speaking quietly in a small drawing room off the main hallway of the residence. “I agree. I told Clayton to keep working and pay close attention to Saalab Investments.”

“Good,” Richard said. “There must have been some reason why both of us believe the game was still on. Even after you questioned it, I can’t get it out of my head.”

“Me, neither.” Curry took a sip of the Scotch he hadn’t touched yet. “It’s like there’s a subliminal message that we can’t quite grab.”

“Let’s channel our inner Machiavelli. I think we should expand the research to include political activity, here and elsewhere in the world. If somebody is building a war chest, I want to know who is getting provisioned.”

“Agreed. I also told Clayton to look into the ownership of Saalab, but it’s a private company. And British. Hard to get very deep.”

Curry leaned back and was quiet. His expression became dark.

“Okay, pal,” Richard said. “I know that look.”

“I’ve had the benefit of foresight for so long. Right now I feel, well, impotent. I don’t like uncertainty.”

“But it is safer to assume in the game but playing with different rules. We’re still on that track. Right?”

After a moment: “Yes, we are.”

CHAPTER 11

The beefy young man sat quietly in Palace of Fine Arts Park, his thin jacket pulled up tight to try to keep out the moist, cold breeze flowing in off the Bay. In another corner of the park, just behind the columns of the rotunda, the squat man had been silently watching and waiting. He then moved like vapor.

“Ben,” Bashir said softly as he seemed to appear from the darkness behind the young man.

Ben Warmack jumped. “Crap!”

“I’m sorry I startled you.”

Ben turned to face his visitor. “Well, you did. And I’m freezing. Why couldn’t we meet in San Mateo? Inside. During the day?”

Bashir sat down next to the young man whose tight curly deep red hair stuck out from under his 49ers cap. “This conversation must be private.”

“Yeah. Well, the birds aren’t even out yet, so I think you’ve achieved that. Now, what is this about? Most investors don’t need this cloak-and-dagger shit.”

“I believe you will appreciate the secrecy, Ahmed.”

At the sound of his real name, Ben recoiled, his green eyes suddenly alert and focused. “What are you talking about? My name...”

Bashir raised his hand. “Please, let us be honest. You are Ahmed Bin Halabi, and you grew up in Falluja. You showed a great deal of promise in software development at a very young age, but your father died when you were fourteen years old, and your mother was American. She had no idea what to do in a foreign land.”

Ben’s eyes were wide as he listened, stunned, pulse quickened.

“Your uncle took you under his guidance and didn’t think Baghdad could offer you the education and opportunity you deserved.

So when you were old enough, he arranged for you to come to the U.S. You hacked into every government database you needed to and created a new identity for yourself: Ben Warmack from Marion, Ohio.”

The young man’s mouth had joined his eyes in a full-face expression of disbelief. “How... how do you know all that?”

The squat man continued: “When your uncle’s various forms of influence gained you admittance to Stanford, you did well. In America, no one knows who you really are. You are fortunate your mother was of Irish descent; you are believably American in appearance. And she taught you to speak English without an accent.”

“You knew my mother and uncle?”

“Yes. Your uncle was a great man, a good friend to our cause.”

Ben closed his mouth as he cocked his head to one side. “Your cause?”

“Ahmed. I’m sorry, Ben. Are you aware of how your uncle died?”

Ben lowered his eyebrows and tried to slip back into stability. His *ammu* was a god to him and the memory of his death still hurt. “What do you know about that? I was told it was a car accident.”

“No. It was not. Shortly after you came here, the Americans tried to recruit him to help overthrow Saddam. When he refused and threatened to reveal the attempt, the CIA assassinated him.”

Ben felt heat expand his head like a balloon; he forgot the cold. “The Americans? The Americans killed my uncle?”

“I am telling the truth, Ahmed.”

The young man’s mind was spinning, anger starting to mix with fond memories, each overtaking the other in turn. “I always suspected he was assassinated. I was aware of some of the intrigue my uncle was involved in, but I assumed that Saddam was behind it. I was just a stupid kid.”

“No, Ahmed. It was the Americans. I’m sorry.”

“How do you know all of this? Who the hell are you?”

“Your uncle and I were good friends and confidants.”

Ben searched the man’s eyes but saw no trickery, no lies. “All of this had been buried too deeply to be made up. You obviously are aware of who I am and where I come from.”

“I am.”

Other emotions suddenly stirred in the young man: fear. His eyes snapped up. “Does the CIA know about me?”

“All evidence has been removed. I assure you that is true.”

“Removed? I left no traces behind when I created my new identity.”

“That was many years ago when you were not as proficient as you are now. You did leave traces, but they are gone now.”

There was a long silence as he digested the last ten minutes. “And my mother? What of her?”

“As far as the Iraqi government was concerned, your mother was an American, so she couldn’t be trusted. Saddam thought he would get the truth from her, but she died in prison.”

“Fuck,” the young man spat, his emotions building. “My sister told me she battled cancer.”

Bashir put his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “I have no idea how she died, but she died in her cell. Alone. The American government did nothing to help her.”

Ben suddenly buried his head in his hands, the pressure exploded and tears that had built up finally escaped.

“I know this is painful.”

He choked back sobs. “And my sister? I haven’t heard from her since she was taken.”

“Aadile works with our people in London. We have provided for her, and she is safe and happy and helping us serve Islam.”

Ben looked up at the squat man through the tears. “Thank you.”

“Someday you can be reunited with her, but we must be very careful. Until that time, understand that we will protect her.”

The squat man put his arm further around Ben’s shoulder. “I also know that you were a very devout Muslim like your father and uncle. Practicing your faith was important, and you feel hollow now that you can’t pray openly.”

The young man studied his visitor. How much like his father he looked. “How can you see what’s in my heart?”

“Am I right?”

“Yes,” he said, holding back fresh tears. “I have desperately wanted to be the Muslim I was—that I am inside. I want to worship Allah, but I can’t reveal who I really am. It would...”

“There are other ways to serve Allah.”

Ben wiped his nose on his sleeve. “What are you talking about?”

“You are 28 years old and already considered a leading expert on cyber-security, a field you have more or less reinvented. You want to start your company, NetGuard, but you can’t find many people who understand your mission. Am I right?”

Ben turned to face the squat man more squarely. “They assume anti-virus programs are going to protect them, that firewalls and ‘intrusion-detection monitors’ will keep hackers from getting in. They have no idea what the Chinese and Russian programmers are planning or are capable of. Yet. Even the best systems just detect intrusion, but at that point, the damage is already done.”

“How is your system different?”

“That’s proprietary.”

“I wouldn’t understand it anyway,” he laughed lightly.

“Look. No offense, but I just met you. I don’t know your name, who you are, who you work for, or what you might understand.”

“But you believe me, yes?”

Ben considered all that he had been told. “Yes. I don’t why, exactly, but I do.” He paused. “Who are you?”

He moved closer to Ben and gazed deeply into the young man’s eyes. “I am the man who can make your dreams come true.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that because we need your expertise, we are willing to finance you as long as it accomplishes our goals, Allah’s goals.”

“Which are?”

“Controlling information.”

Ben raised one eyebrow. “Who’s information?”

“Anyone who can further our noble cause. Financial markets, banking, intelligence.”

“But my software doesn’t...”

The squat man stopped him. “I know more than you think, Ben. You wrote an article once that suggested that you could plant a program in any system and have it do whatever you wanted.”

“That was a stupid article.”

“Meaning you can’t, or meaning...”

“It was stupid to write it.”

“Meaning you can.”

“Yes. I can embed a program in anyone’s system that allows complete control over their databases, emails... everything. And they would never suspect anything.”

“And you could use the NetGuard to gain access to plant it, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then we have chosen well. All we need to do is install NetGuard on every critical network in the world.”

Ben sat back and laughed. “Why didn’t I think of that?” Ben turned to look at the lights of the Golden Gate Bridge through the weakening fog and his smile fell off. “Not all of them, just the right ones. But that would take years.”

The squat man smiled. “We don’t think so.”

“Why? And who is ‘we’?”

“Let me just say that my associates are powerful and passionate about a few things. Our Muslim faith and serving Allah is the priority, always the priority. We also understand your mission and how important it is to the future of our mission. There are significant financial resources at our disposal, which we intend to use as weapons in the Jihad that is coming.”

“Jihad?” Ben exclaimed. “What are you saying?”

“We all must serve Allah according to our strengths, Ben. Jihad isn’t all about suicide bombers. It’s a slow process of change. You can play a critical role. You are a weapon.”

Ben contemplated all that he heard. “And?”

“And I am here to offer you three things: First, we will use our considerable influence to protect your identity; you will never be at risk of detection. Secondly, I offer you unlimited financial resources to

develop and build your business. We want you to become the primary provider of cyber-security systems throughout the world.”

“And third?” Ben asked after a moment.

“Third, we offer you a powerful way to serve Islam. You will please Allah as few men have done. Al-hamdu lillah. Once your control programs are installed, we can weaken and defeat the infidels, including the men who stole your uncle and mother from you, from the inside. Our ancestors succeeded by wielding swords of steel; we will succeed with the swords of information and power.”

Over the next, ten minutes, Ben listened quietly to the squat man as he expanded on his ideas and goals and plans. When he was finished, it didn't take Ben long to decide. He had been filled with resolve and a re-focused purpose.

Ben took the man's hand. “Al-hamdu lillah. I will join you.”

“Insha'Allah.”