

## CHAPTER ONE

Ahmed felt the butt of the rifle strike his spine between his shoulder blades as his knees buckled, and he hit the floor. The sensation of falling was even stranger because he couldn't see anything. It was as if he were in slow motion, spiraling out of control.

His hands were shackled behind his back, so there was no way to break his fall. He landed on his side, slamming his shoulder into the cold concrete floor. He could feel the fibers of the black hood against his lips, and smell the sweat of the last person who had been forced to wear it. He stood up and started to walk again.

“Move faster Haji!” commanded an authoritative voice in a Southern American drawl. Ahmed felt the rifle butt hit hard against his spine again and he shuffled faster, within the confines of his ankle chains, which allowed only a minimum of movement. Thoughts of his wife Catherine, her silky brown hair, soft brown eyes and captivating smile, and their two small children, Karen and Cameron, back in their home in Santa Barbara, flooded his brain. These thoughts were the only thing lately that kept him sane.

“Up against the wall! – Stop there! Up against the wall I said – now!”

Ahmed stopped and did as he was commanded.

“Listen up!” barked a mechanical voice in the darkness, “My name is Sergeant Brown. You have been

placed in my custody. You're here because you have refused to cooperate in interrogations. The decision has been made to execute you by firing squad."

"Wait!" said Ahmed, "I'm an American citizen."

"Sure you are, A-hab."

"My name is Ahmed."

"Your name is A-hab. A-hab the A-rab and the only thing I need to hear from you today is whether you want your mask on or off."

"Off."

Ahmed felt the black bag ripped from his head and, for the first time, faced his aggressors. The man who had ripped off his bag was a young man in military camouflage fatigues, holding an M16 to his chest. In front of him was an eight-man firing squad, also in camouflage fatigues, with rifles at their sides in ready position. Standing at their side was obviously Sergeant Brown, a hefty black man with huge hands, the only one not holding a weapon. For a 25-year-old man like Brown, who was always inept in every way outside the service, power was orgasmic. He basked in it like the sun, as if he was on a white sand beach in Maui.

Brown was proud to be in United States Army, the finest military service of the greatest country in the world, a beacon for freedom, the leader of the New World Order. The Army was his life, a life that had so much more depth, meaning and importance than it did before. He was entrusted with the valuable task of shaping young men and

women under his charge to destroy the enemy and wipe terrorism from the planet. The enemy was the low-life, stinking Arabs, those sand niggers, the little maggots who had strapped bombs to themselves and had blown his comrades to bits in Iraq. They were like a disease, a plague that had to be wiped out.

“I have the right to talk to an attorney,” Ahmed pleaded.

“You what? You don’t have any rights, A-hab,” said Brown, “You’re a terrorist. The only right you have is to choose to wear the mask or not, and you already exercised that right.”

The young soldier fastened a leather strap around Ahmed’s waist, pinning his spine to a wooden post. He turned his head to look behind himself at the canvas wall, pocked with gunshots. The soldier then strapped his ankles to the post.

“Please, let me call my lawyer. This is all a big mistake!”

“Yeah, yeah, a big mistake. I’ve heard that one before. All you fucking Hajis say the same goddamn thing – it’s programmed. You should have cooperated when we asked about your superiors in al Qaeda.”

“I don’t know anyone in al Qaeda.”

“Don’t bullshit me, boy!”

Brown, like a machine, pivoted, walked a few paces, and then pivoted again, so he was face to face with Ahmed, took a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it

and recited in a military monotone, “You have been found guilty of terrorism. The penalty is death by firing squad. Do you have any last statement?”

“But I...”

“I repeat, do you have any last statement?”

“Yes, please, I want to cooperate, I really do, but I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know anything!”

The young man with the M16 then approached Ahmed, pinned a white heart onto his chest, and moved back. Brown marched off to the right of the firing squad.

Sweat was dripping into Ahmed’s eyes, stinging them. He said a silent prayer, thought about his wife and children, then looked at Brown with defiant eyes.

“I’m not a terrorist. I am an American citizen. I have the right, like any other American citizen, to a lawyer and a trial before any execution. I have been denied these rights. You will answer to God for your crimes.”

“To hell with your rights, boy. We got all the rights here,” said Brown, who raised his arm and shouted, “READY!”

The eight marksmen cocked their rifles.

“AIM!”

The eight pointed their rifles at Ahmed, who shivered uncontrollably. His knees gave way and he hung on the post like a man crucified.

“FIRE!”

The deafening explosion of the eight rifles was the last thing Ahmed heard. He felt the bullets hit his flesh and his body crumpled forward, hanging lifelessly from the post like a scarecrow.

## CHAPTER TWO

Catherine Khury sat in the plain-wrap waiting room of the FBI's Santa Barbara field office, fidgeting in her purse for her phone. *Hold it together, Cate!* she told herself. She had been living in hell the past few weeks. She was an attractive woman, but her ordeal made every one of her 30 years appear as if she had lived her life without sleeping. She looked at the time. Only five minutes had passed since the last time she had checked. A friendly looking, pretty young woman entered the room.

"Hello, ma'am, I'm Agent Wollard," the woman said, extending her hand, which Catherine shook.

"Catherine Khury."

"Would you please come in?"

Catherine sat in a small steel and vinyl black chair and Agent Wollard behind an aluminum desk with a false wood veneer surface.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Khury?"

“My husband, Ahmed, is missing.” Catherine’s bottom lip began to quiver, as she fought back tears. She had to remain strong; strong for her husband, and especially for her children.

“Mrs. Khury, we don’t really look for missing persons here at the FBI.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“Well, we do maintain a database of missing persons, but unless it’s a child, and foul play is suspected, we don’t really get actively involved.”

“Agent Wollard, I don’t know where else to go. My husband and his brother have been missing since my husband went to Iraq to help him.”

“Your husband is in Iraq?”

“The last I heard. But nobody has seen or heard from him in days,” Catherine sobbed, struggling to keep her composure.

Angela handed her a tissue from the box on her desk. “Is your husband a United States citizen?”

“Yes, he has been for many years.”

The tears finally made their way over the spillgates, and Catherine emptied them into the tissue.

“Have you tried to find him in Iraq?”

“Yes, but the only person I know there is his brother and he’s not answering. I don’t have anyone else to call.”

“Well, the best I can do is to take a missing persons report and make a couple of phone calls.”

“Would you please?” Catherine felt instant relief. Even though this Agent Wollard didn’t promise a solution, just having any kind of help made her feel less hopeless.

“Yes, of course. Please, fill out these forms and, when you’re done, I can enter the information into our missing person’s database.”

“Thank you Agent Wollard.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

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After Mrs. Khury left, Angela processed the report, and then called Bill Thompson, one of her contacts in Washington.

“Bill, I’ve got a missing persons case that I may need your help on.”

“Since when does the bureau really ever work a missing person’s case?”

Angela chuckled. “I’ve been known to do it from time to time. Listen, he’s an Iraqi born, U.S. citizen, who went to Iraq last month and nobody has heard from him in about a week. His wife is worried to death.”



“Send me an email and I’ll make some calls.”

“Thanks Bill.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Ahmed opened his eyes to complete blackness. *Am I alive?* Panicking, he put his hand in front of his face and he couldn't see it. He moved his fingers. Still nothing. Ahmed's frantic eyes moved back and forth and there was not a sliver of light. *I'm blind*, he thought. A sudden surge of adrenalin compelled him to action. His brain sent a signal to stand up and, as he did, the pain shot from his feet to his head like a hammer hit on a high striker in a carnival. Gravity pulled his broken body to his knees and he collapsed. He felt his body: No clothing.

*What happened? Am I dead?*

*No*, he thought, *I must be alive*. He was in too much pain to be dead. He felt his chest for bullet wounds, but found none. Except for some tender spots on his chest and back and some scrapes on his knees, there was nothing. *They must have used rubber bullets.*

Ahmed strained to see, but it was no use. He felt his face: It was swollen and bruised. *They must have blinded me in the shooting*, he thought. As his other four senses

came to life, he realized that he was sore all over. He tried to stand again, but his legs would not cooperate. He felt them with his new eyes; the bones felt straight and unbroken. *Must be sprains, but why am I blind?* He struggled to control the panic and the terror. *Think, think. Have to think.*

Ahmed crawled on his hands and knees and propped himself up against the wall, which was as cold and damp as the floor. He felt along the walled boundaries of his confinement. *One, two, three, four, five, six, about seven feet in one direction. One, two, three, four, about five feet in the other direction.* Next, he negotiated the circumference on his hands and knees.

How did he get himself into this mess? From his cozy home in Santa Barbara, to the battered and occupied Baghdad, to this. His brother, Sabeen needed his help, so he went. It was as simple as that. The next events were a blur to him; The raid, his capture. Now he was in some kind of military prison.

Since his capture, Ahmed had been stripped naked, cavity searched, shaved bald, beaten, kicked and spat on. And then the mock execution. It made his current confinement in this dark cage somewhat of a relief, not at all what it was designed for. The walls were as cold as a headstone. He felt around them until he came to a steel door.

He thought of his wife, Catherine. She must know he was missing by now. But even if he was to be rescued, what good is a blind husband? An accountant by trade, there was no way he could work with figures as a blind

man. He would be a complete burden on the entire family. *The best thing to do is to kill myself*, he thought. He had some life insurance, and wondered if it would pay off in the event of his suicide.

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The time passed, but Ahmed had no way of measuring it. *How long have I been like this?* Ahmed concentrated on his other senses, but there was no input, save the sound of the pounding of his own heart. His mouth was as dry as a slab of jerky, so he tried to wet his broken lips with his tongue. In despair, he dropped to the floor. Lying there on his back, he rubbed his eyes and, suddenly, he saw tiny stars above him in the blackness. *Light! I can see light!*

The tiny stars spread out in a geometric pattern, like symbols in a matrix. *Those can't be stars. They're not random.* Ahmed's accountant's brain analyzed the patterns of light, but then they turned into eyes, angrily staring at him. *Stop! Stop! Please, somebody help me!* Then the eyes pulled back to reveal a miniature firing squad, with their rifles trained on Ahmed. He heard the blast of their rifles, almost in slow motion, and felt the bullets ripping through his flesh as his brain switched off.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Ahmed opened his eyes to complete darkness again. He was still blind, but the need to urinate affirmed that he was still alive.

His nostrils filled with the sweet smell of food: chicken...thyme...rosemary...potatoes. *Soup!*

*But was it real?* On his hands and knees, he crawled the surface of the concrete floor, looking for the soup and for something to pee in, just in case he had to drink his own urine to survive. If worse came to worse, he could eat the soup and then pee in the container.

Gingerly, his hands methodically covered the surface of the floor, until they met resistance. Gripping it with his fingers, he realized it was a Styrofoam cup, about 12 ounces in capacity. He explored inside, the cup with one finger. *Water!* But Ahmed resisted the impulse to drain the cup. Instead he smelled it, and, sensing no foul odor, tasted just a bit on his tongue. It was fresh and cooling, which immediately gave rise to the instinctual urge to gulp

it down. Not wanting to throw it up, Ahmed took a mouthful and swirled it around with his tongue before swallowing. The taste of minerals and the cool wetness was the most pleasing thing he had experienced in such a long time. Ahmed slowly savored every drop of the precious water, and then continued on his quest refreshed.

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The soup was still lukewarm when Ahmed found it. He grasped the small bowl with both hands as the aroma filled his lungs, and sipped on the broth, then reached in and pulled out a piece of potato. It was the best thing he had ever tasted.

There was no telling how long his stomach had been empty. The pangs of hunger had subsided long ago and, since he had no way of tracking time, that concept had fallen away from his consciousness, as the hunger had. Ahmed knew that this first taste of food in who knows how long may be his last for a while, so he saved half the bowl for later, knowing that the hunger would return as soon as his body realized it had been nourished once again.

He had only spent a few days with Sabeen before the military police took them away and separated them. *Sabeen was a grocer! Why would they think he was a terrorist?* Since then, Ahmed had lived the nightmare of his new life in captivity, first aboard a military transport, then on a huge jet, all the while with bound hands and feet

and a hood over his head, until he was dumped on the ground, naked, in this new prison, wherever it was. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten before such delicious chicken soup.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Angela put on her sweater and looked at herself in her pocket mirror. She wiped off a bit of the stray mascara around her green eyes and put a brush through her hair. Just as she was about to lock up the office, the phone rang.

“Agent Wollard,” she answered.

“Angie, it’s Bill. I’ve got some info on your Mr. Khury, but it’s not something you want to get involved in.”

“I’ll decide that Bill, what’ve you got?”

“Khury shows up in Baghdad about three weeks ago. His brother, Sabeen, is a suspected money launderer for al Qaeda.”

“I see. CIA talk.” The CIA was always looking to tie every kind of criminal activity in the Middle East to al Qaeda.

“You got that right.”



“Since when does the CIA tell the Bureau what to do?”

“Since we have no jurisdiction. Khury’s in Guantanamo.”

“That shit hole is still open?”

“Damn right it is. Please, don’t tell anyone I told you, and for God’s sake, don’t get involved. This is classified stuff.”

“Who says?”

“It comes from high up.”

“How high?”

“Lose your job high, get it?”

“I do Bill, thanks.”

“We’re square now, Angie, this was a big one.”

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“You’re late again.” Rick Penn stood up and smiled, his six foot six inch frame towering over the small table as Angela nervously paced into the restaurant. Rick was a retired FBI agent, now a private investigator, and had been Angela’s mentor during her first days in the bureau. At 54, he had served out his last days with the Bureau in Santa Barbara, and then retired there. Now he could take it easy and be his own boss. For years, Rick had worn the

same type of G-man suit, but now he was free of those chains and could wear whatever he pleased. But, for his meeting with Angela today, he dressed up in a white shirt, tie and baggy pants: The Columbo look.

“I’m sorry, it’s my job.”

“I know. All is forgiven. They saved us the best table.”

The maître d’ led them to a nice table in front of a crackling fireplace. Santa Barbara had many cozy restaurants like Cava. Nestled on Coast Village Road in Montecito, having a meal there was comfy, like being in your own living room.

“Rick, I know somebody who needs your help, but I could lose my job for telling you about it.”

“You could always join my PI firm, retire early like me,” Rick smiled, “Now tell me about this potential client?”

“He’s a naturalized citizen, being held at Guantanamo.”

“Guano-mo, huh? The neo-Nazi concentration camp.”

“Yes. His wife came to me to file a missing person’s case. I think you should talk to her.”

Rick brushed his graying hair out of his eyes. “You’re a few weeks shy of a haircut, aren’t you Rick?”

Rick chuckled. “At least I have some hair left. Just email me her contact info and I’ll give her a call.”

“Thanks Rick.”

Rick had read a lot about the suspected terrorists being held at Guantanamo Bay indefinitely. It was the kind of case that Rick’s best friend, lawyer Brent Marks, had always dreamed about: Going against the grain to fight for an individual’s rights. After 18 years of slugging it out as a “poor man’s lawyer” Brent had gained plenty of experience righting wrongs, but there was only so much you could do with a drunk driving or spousal abuse case. This case sounded like fertile Constitutional Law ground for Brent, and Rick would keep the investigation gig on the case.

The military prison at Guantanamo was the equivalent of any concentration camp in Nazi Germany, the most shameful example of the cruel and complete abolition of all human rights by the Government, all in the name of the war on terrorism. Two days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the Congress gave authority to the president to use military force, and, since then, the military, not the U.S. courts, had jurisdiction over anyone suspected as an “enemy combatant,” And could do with them as they pleased, without the constraints of the U.S. Constitution.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rick called Brent and arranged to meet later that day after work. That could be a somewhat vague term for Brent, who was quite the workaholic when he was on a case. They had met about eight years earlier, when Rick had walked into Brent's office and scared the crap out of him by flashing his FBI badge. It turned out Rick was just looking for some legal advice for a case he was working on. The two stayed in contact and became close over the years.

Brent was wrapping up an interview with a potential client, an Indian guy who had been accused of a hit and run, not the type of a case he had been dreaming of, but the kind he had been known to take to keep the doors open. The client was trying to explain his case to Brent, but it seemed he didn't have much of a defense.

"I'm having a little trouble following your story, Mr. Babu. You're telling me that you hit the car, and you didn't stop, right?"

“No, no, that’s not it at all. I hit the guy, and then I look around, and I don’t see him. Then I drive around and around and around, and I still do not see the guy, so I go home.”

“So you didn’t stop?”

“How could I stop when I did not see the guy?”

“Mr. Babu, if I take your case, I’m going to require a retainer up front.”

“But I don’t have any cash. Look, look, my cousin is a tailor in Hong Kong. He makes the best suits in the world. Do you need a suit?”

“You want to pay me in suits?”

“Yes, please, look, look, I have the swatches right here.” Babu pulled some material samples from his bag, and held them out to Brent. “Feel the material. It is the finest material in the world!”

“I don’t know, Mr. Babu.”

“Please, Mr. Marks. You must take my case. I will pay you in suits now, and then, when I get some money, I will give you money. You must help me. I cannot sleep, I cannot make love with my wife. It is like a death in the family!”

It was almost a comedy. Brent felt the urge to look around the room for the hidden camera. He suppressed a grin.

“It’s late, Mr. Babu. Can I call you tomorrow with my decision?”

“Yes, yes, thank you Mr. Marks, thank you!”

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Brent closed up the office and left. With 18 years of practice under his belt, he was close to being able to decline the Mr. Babu's and focus on more important cases. He thought of the comical interview and laughed to himself. Brent was the first American of his generation, so he had a soft spot for the immigrants.

His father, Jose, had emigrated from Spain and completely assimilated into American pop culture, even changed the family name from Marquez to Marks. Thankfully, his father spoke Spanish at home to Brent and his brother John. It was an advantage that came in handy in the practice of his profession.

At about seven, Brent walked into the Press Room on Ortega Street to find his friend Rick waiting at the bar.

“There he is! What’s up, Big Dog?”

“Hey, Rick.”

Rick rose from the bar stool, so tall a man that it seemed he would hit the ceiling, and swung into a power handshake with Brent.

“Good to see you, buddy,” said Rick.

“You too. It’s been a long time.” Brent slid into the chair next to Rick at the sticky bar counter.

“Dude, you’re supposed to be a bachelor. Only married men have your dead boring social life.”

“Yeah, well I’ve kind of been seeing somebody.”

“Do tell. Come on, give me all the details, and don’t leave out the measurements. 36-24-36, D cup?”

“Come on, man!”

“No, dude, I’m happy for you whenever you have a relationship that lasts more than three weeks. It’s not that piece of ass secretary of yours – Melinda – is it?”

“No, no, her name is Debbie.”

“Debbie? As in dumb blonde Debbie Does Dallas, something like that?”

“Dude! It’s not like that. I’m really enjoying her company.”

“So, a meaningful relationship. Dude, have fun, but wear a condom, that’s all I can say.”

“Very funny. What’s this new case that you’ve taken on?”

“Really interesting. And it’s your kind of case. Not one of those nut jobs you take to pay the rent.”

“I’ve still got a few of those.”

“I know, but this one is really juicy. This rag head marries an American girl, right? He’s the gung-ho, I love

America kind of immigrant, accountant, two kids, the house, the whole nine yards. Becomes a U.S. citizen..."

"Yeah?"

"Then his brother calls him with some kind of family crisis back in Iraq, and he goes, right? Well, his brother is involved in some kind of money laundering operation back there – he's got this cash grocery business – and he gets raided by MPs. Our guy gets picked up and shipped to Gitmo."

Brent almost choked on his beer. "What?"

"That's right. They're keeping him there; think he's some kind of terrorist. No charges, no counsel, no visitors. A virtual Nazi prison camp."

"Whoa, watch it. I thought you were a flag-waving Republican."

"Dude, this transcends politics. George W. Bush is wiping his ass with the Constitution."

"Careful, that's your ex-boss you're talking about."

"Yeah, the same one who said to the Brazilian president, 'Oh do you have blacks too?'" Rick snorted and took a gulp of beer.

"How about, 'Africa is a nation that suffers from incredible disease,'" said Brent, wiping away tears he was laughing so hard.

"It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic." Rick gargled his beer between laughs.



“My favorite one is, ‘this foreign policy stuff is a little frustrating.’ Like he’s learning it in high school or something.”

“How about, ‘I know what I believe. I will continue to articulate what I believe and what I believe. I believe what I believe is right.’ It’s almost enough to make me turn into a Democrat, like you.”

“Dude, I’m not a Democrat, I’m a Libertarian.”

“A Libertarian’s just a Democrat whose vote doesn’t count. Same thing.”

“How’d you find out about this case anyway?” asked Brent, trying to get back on a serious track.

“Dude, I’m a secret agent man.”

“From someone in the Bureau.”

“Exactly, a confidential source. Look, I’ve talked to his wife and I recommended you for the job.”

Rick was right. Brent was so enthusiastic about the case he had to practically fight him not to go back to the office.

“I can’t wait to take this case, Rick.”

“Dude, chill out. It’ll still be there in the morning. I’m not letting anyone else have it.”

