

**THE
DESTINY
SECRET**

A Plot to Change the World

**BY
GUY CLINTON**

SECOND EDITION

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U.S. ENGLISH EDITION

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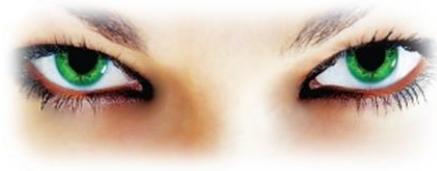
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*It's the revolutionaries who are polite,
that you must watch out for*

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INTRODUCTION

A malevolent genius unleashes a dangerous plot that could bring America crashing to its knees in less than six months. His plot is frighteningly easy to implement, yet extremely hard to combat. He aims to up-end the rule of law in such a way that even the police will turn against it. Whatever it takes, he must be stopped.

Leah, an Oxford University graduate with big ambitions, together with handsome NSA agent, JJ, are caught in events seemingly beyond their control. Their resourcefulness, intelligence and wit become the only things left standing between world stability and total chaos. This engrossing and at times, chilling novel, holds within its pages a genuinely subversive plot that in the wrong hands could easily be turned into a nightmarish reality.

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THE MONKEY IN THE MACHINE

New York

The sun was just breaking over the horizon when he leaned back in his chair and stretched. It had taken him all week, working day and night, but he had finally finished the task. He had slept only briefly, his concentration maintained by two pounds of Darjeeling tea, half an ounce of Peruvian cocaine and four cartons of unfiltered Camel cigarettes.

He rubbed his eyes wearily; the blue one was throbbing again. Because of his fabulous wealth it would be dangerous to delegate this particular task, so he had written all eighteen websites for his new 'business initiative' himself.

Though each site looked quite different they were remarkably similar in function. He was connecting Arabs who lived in western countries, so they could meet online and do business, or date, or chat, or find old friends and family. Seven of the sites were dotcoms specifically targeted at the three million Arabs living in the United States and there was an online supermarket, which he surreptitiously subsidized by thirty percent; selling the hard-to-get delicacies of the Middle East and then drop-shipping the orders direct to his customers' homes.

Last but not least, there was an investment fund for start-up ventures.

It shouldn't take long, he thought.

He was right.

Within six months the eighteen sites were getting twenty-five thousand hits a day between them. They even began to produce a healthy revenue, which he used to supplement the stores and businesses that sprang up from his financing, right across America.

The requests for funding new enterprises had come flooding in; he had carefully examined them all. For those fortunate enough to receive his investment there was an additional requirement: He would send over a representative to work alongside them in the business.

'He will provide assistance and the money when needed. This way, there is no need for a complicated contract between us,' he would say before agreeing the investment capital on fantastically discounted terms, 'It will give the business a head start,' he explained, making sure he never met his new partners in person, stipulating they conduct all communication only by phone and email.

The arrangement is fairly common practice in the Middle East, but his method differed in one aspect: He liked to pay his business lieutenants' wages out of his own pocket and not from the profit generated – which was the expected way.

Free help is hard to refuse when you are starting a new business, so most people welcomed the assistance, turning blind eyes to the possibility that their companies were being closely monitored.

'As long as it's profitable and no one is stealing too much, there's nothing to worry about,' said his new-found partners. 'It's only for six months while the business gets going. If it was my money I would want someone keeping an eye on it. So he reports back, so what?'

'He will be staying in our house. We can keep an eye on him too.'

It was true that detailed reports were being sent back. He had designed two databases on which he kept every piece of information sent, but one was smaller than the other. The smaller one held the business data, while the larger one contained complete dossiers on the owners themselves: Their habits, movements, social security numbers, family and friends' names, even the passwords to their computer systems. He also had the keys to their houses, cars and offices duplicated - then posted on to him – secretly.

It was surprising how many different types of business there were, but when searched by category, it

was noticeable that over fifty percent were delivery companies, while only five percent were corner shops.

He liked companies that delivered a product – especially mainstream office items and technology. He had twenty-seven computer companies, all supplying their paper, ink and printers to a wide-ranging client base, including banks and blue chip companies, stretching from coast-to-coast. There were thirteen import companies, mainly handling food, and seven private security firms guarding construction sites at night.

He really could congratulate himself on a job well done. He had helped birth one hundred and thirteen businesses in the United States in a very short space of time, beating his most optimistic forecast by a wide margin.

Phase one is now complete, he thought with satisfaction, after conducting a painstaking review of his databases one evening.

Reaching across the marble desk, he picked up a blini heaped with yellow Almas caviar; the rarest, most expensive on earth.

‘It looks as if my careful planning is over,’ he said aloud in the empty study, becoming increasingly excited as he popped the blini in his mouth, the soft taste of the sea flooding his senses.

Glancing at the bottle of 1972 Premier Cru Champagne, lovingly polished and opened by the butler, he snorted derisively then tapped the intercom on his desk.

‘My mistake, Charles. Bring me one of the 1944’s, would you? I have something special to celebrate this evening.’

‘Certainly Sir. Chilled, I presume? That will only take me five minutes.

‘I have waited years for this moment - another five minutes will only heighten my pleasure - take all the time you need.’

‘Given that you have only two bottles of ’44 left, perhaps I should take the liberty of adding another couple of minutes, to chill it gradually, Sir.’

‘Perfect, because I have one more task to complete,’ he smiled, clicking his computer on.

Selecting the file ‘DSTNSCRT’ he typed in his number code 24816 to open it and then confirmed he had all the documents by checking their titles...

Attack_Plan.doc

End_American_Gov.doc

Impeach_President.doc

After right-clicking on 24816 he deleted the file. ‘With phase one complete,’ he said, getting up from his desk to squeeze fresh lemon juice over the caviar, ‘I can now begin phase two - the attack to put America on its knees - in a few short months. A few sweet months of agonizing chaos and destruction,’ he smiled dreamily. ‘It will concentrate their fear and anger on their own government. It will be delightful watching the American people tear it down, for me.’

Picking up another blini he spooned caviar onto it. ‘It’s about time the American people put their democracy in order. So I’ll give them the coup-de-grace; the downfall and destruction of their government. Why not?

‘They can own their own anarchy. Ha! The perfect oxymoron for an imperfect world; the imperfect world *they* formulated.’

There was a polite knock on the door, and the butler stepped into the study carrying an ornate silver tray. With a slight, quick lick of his lips, he placed it reverently on the table then proceeded to open it - handling the bottle as though pouring wine into the holy grail itself.

‘Have a glass of this exceptional wine with me, Charles.’

'Thank you, Sir, I will. Have you finished writing your memoirs, Sir?'

He was in such a good mood that his reply was almost 'No, my memoir is about to begin,' but instead took the glass Charles was offering.

'Yes, I have finally finished book five. I'm thinking of releasing the first five books as one. Really attack the market head-on.'

'I'm sure a lot of people will enjoy it. I look forward to reading it myself, Sir.' he said, sounding almost convinced by the rhetoric.

You never will. I've just deleted it, he thought.

'To its success, Sir.'

'Yes Charles. To the successful launch of my memoir.'

'To the successful launch of your attack on the market, Sir,' corrected Charles to receive a stone-cold look from his employer, 'Only joking, Sir.'

Quickly, he searched the butler's expression for any trace of genuine fear. No, it's embarrassment, he realized, if he did know, that hint would get him killed.

They clinked glasses. 'No apology required, Charles - to the successful launch of my attack - as you put it.'

'Good luck, Sir.' Charles drained his glass and put it down swiftly.

'Let me refill you, Charles.'

'Are you sure, Sir?'

'Of course I'm sure. Here.'

'What shall we drink to this time, Sir?'

'As it's the launch of my new memoir, let's drink to..., to people getting the destiny they deserve.'

'Ahh, so there's a bit of cut-n-thrust to it, Sir. I like that in a good read.'

'Cut, thrust and turn,' he bounced back. 'Would you fill my bathtub for me, Charles? You can take the glass with you, if you like.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

As the door closed he went back to the keyboard and ran a scan to see if anyone had been on his computer. He was relieved to see that no-one, with the exception of himself, had touched it.

Relaxed, he sank into a chair wondering about his anonymity, the butler's inadvertent comment focusing his mind. It would be foolish to start phase three from here; I am a local curiosity, an enigma. No-one can find out anything about me, or my wealth. Perhaps I should re-locate, take up gainful employment, get a job - the perfect cover - because the countrywide chaos about to hit them, and the destruction of their government, brought down by its own people, is not something they will thank me for.

Initially.



THE DESTINY SECRET

SECOND EDITION

PART ONE

QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES?

Who will keep watch over the guardians?

MONKEYING

Oxford

Leah felt nervous as she stood outside the study door, her nerves indeed stretched to breaking point by the knowledge that she was twenty minutes late; the professor had a well-known intolerance of tardiness.

I wonder what he'll be like? Bearded and smelly I bet, she thought defensively.

Picking up the heavy door knocker, Leah rapped it hard against its metal stud. The noise boomed loudly as the shockwave echoed down the stone cloister. She went up on her toes in embarrassment.

A voice from inside the study called out in annoyance, 'Come in. Come in. And stop that dreadful banging, it's enough to waken Neptune from his slumber.'

Leah smoothed her skirt, stepped in and smiled with a confidence she wasn't feeling. For the past two weeks she had Googled the professor extensively, surprised to discover there wasn't a single photograph of him anywhere. She had unearthed reams of articles and references to him in the press, detailing his advice and guidance to many different governments over the years, but no picture. It was noticeably odd in a person so intrinsically involved with the world, and she looked at him cautiously...

He was the opposite of the picture she had drawn in her mind.

The Professor stood tall and straight, but poised, emanating a *Présence Royale* as though he were on the brink of orchestrating a momentous event. His white hair was swept back behind his ears and grown long, rolling down his neck like a mane. He was clean shaven and looked barely fifty years of age, although she knew from her research that he was really sixty-four.

What stopped her abruptly were his eyes. The left was a startling emerald green. His right, the light blue of an Arctic current.

'Ahh, you must be the "late" Miss Leah Samantha Karen Mandrille,' he said as though announcing her name in court, his eyes holding hers steadily.

'Yes. I am both, unfortunately,' she replied, sounding confident and mature.

Breaking his stare he gestured at the far corner of the room. 'Let's go and sit in the window seat, which currently serves as my dining room.'

Leah walked over, sat down, then swiveled her legs under the ancient oak dining table, glancing around the room to take in her surroundings.

The room was large and there were books everywhere. The ceiling was double-height and an extensive library covered every square inch the walls could offer up; it wasn't nearly enough.

Zigzagging columns of books and tomes were balancing precariously on the floor and chairs, some left open, defying gravity.

Over in the middle of the room, hidden among the confused sea of volumes was an island formed by a round table, on which sat a huge chess set with the pieces laid out - the white king's pawn already advanced two squares - as if trying to tempt an invisible black opponent into making the next move.

Leah looked up at the professor, who had chosen not to sit but stand. Amusement was tweaking the corners of his mouth. 'Given that you are twenty minutes late, I thought we should celebrate. May I offer you a dry sherry?'

'I'm so sorry I am late. But someone...'

The professor instantly held up his left hand stopping her mid-sentence, as he poured the wine into two Renaissance glasses.

'Please don't apologize. I prefer to celebrate your victory over the Jaws of Death, or some other

cataclysm, which no doubt influenced your delay,' he said, handing her a glass which spun diamonds around the room.

Holding up his own in salute, he offered a toast, 'To the Jaws of Death. Without them, the hallowed Halls of Life would be valueless.'

Leah raised her glass with him, trying to maintain a level and open demeanor. Though young, she was very astute and had been able to read hearts and minds from an early age, but as she tried to gauge his emotions her sight was drawn into his green eye. It was flecked with gold and she felt herself being pulled toward its source.

But the deeper she went, the farther Leah seemed to get from any insight to the man. Becoming aware of her stare, she switched over to his blue eye and went hunting there for clues to his persona.

Nothing at first, and then slowly she saw it. Nestling deep in the sapphire blue iris glistened a small flicker of humor – as in a joke unsaid or the glint of an imaginary irony perhaps – the same look her younger brothers shared moments before they did something truly horrid.

Forcing herself to relax she sipped at her sherry, and after a brief silence the professor reached down to pluck a worn clipboard off the dining table. Glancing at the A4 sheets he said offhandedly, 'It says here you wish to study Political Theory, Human Psychology, Political History, blah. Political Science, more blah, with an emphasis on... blah, which happens to include all seven subjects I teach. Now please help me, my girl, I am unable to ascertain whether this constitutes flattery or gluttony. What is your opinion?'

'Definitely flattery, it's one of the few things I never overestimate,' Leah replied, trying to soften the compliment with a little humor.

'Hmmm, I wouldn't underestimate the lure of gluttony, when it comes to the *body politic*.'

The professor beamed a charming smile at her, heartfelt and open, with only a hint of guile.

'The thing is, Miss Mandrille, most of the students who come here are eighteen to twenty years old and our system of teaching supports them well. There is a certain understanding of the world which only comes with age. So with all due respect to what you have achieved in the exam room, I strongly recommend that you wait a year or two before enrolling. At seventeen, you will gain far less from Oxford than you will in a year. Take some time off. Travel, get tattooed. Then you can come back here to Oxford, relaxed in the sure and certain knowledge that for once, you are perfectly on time.'

So there it was, deftly thrown on the table in under a minute - he didn't feel she should take up her place at the University because she was one year early - and twenty minutes late.

She wondered whether to play it back with subservient acquiescence or a more sure-footed confidence. 'Definitely neither,' she realized. To quench her thirst for the knowledge Leah could sense was out there, hiding just over the horizon of this interview, she must show genuine substance to convince this man she was mature enough to enroll in twelve weeks' time.

After weighing her options carefully, she decided on a full frontal attack.

'Let's see. My mother died of cancer when I was seven, which meant I had to grow up rather quickly. She left me and four brothers, two of them younger than myself, and my father, who went on from Oxford to become a career diplomat. By the age of twelve I was fluent in various dialects of Arabic, Farsi, French and Italian, and was fighting my elder siblings, while nurturing the other two. When I was fourteen, my eldest brother Simon and I sneaked out to climb a section of Mont Blanc, where I had my first near-death experience. Sadly, Simon was less fortunate. My father took it badly and I had to nurse him through our dreadful loss. In seven short years he had lost his wife and first child, while I had lost my mother and best friend.'

'I am sorry to hear that, but misfortune and tragedy often worship at the same altar. Pray continue.'

'My father and I became interdependent. He asked me to hostess the dinner parties and luncheons that he frequently held at home as part of his diplomatic position. I learned a great deal from this exposure, and taught myself composure. Then at fifteen, he extended my role to being his official escort

at various diplomatic functions. At first they terrified me, now I wonder what could. Most of my schooling was done on my own, or online, and with the exception of chemistry, my grades were always As – as you can see. Taken together, these experiences have given me a greater maturity and worldliness than most twenty-five-year-olds. Plus of course, I have one thing they have lost.'

'I wonder what that might be?' prompted the professor.

And she pulled the trigger.

'I'm a blank coin on which you can make your stamp. I trust this means that by twenty-one I will have my Masters in both Political Science and Human Psychology. These, along with my languages and the experience I gained from my father, will make me the youngest ambassador Britain has ever fielded. I am aware that you are one of the world's foremost political thinkers; that you have hand-steered democracy into many different countries during your lifetime. A few I spoke with confided you are a sought-after advisor to several governments' think-tanks, and compete for your patronage and advice. I thought if I proved worthy, you could advise me how to launch my own career in the diplomatic corps. That's why I applied for all of your courses first, fitting in the others around them. I'm here because I believe you can help me achieve my ambition,' then deciding to give the knife of her logic a playful twist she added, 'Quicker than I could on my own.'

Leah lifted her glass and sipped, watching the professor closely, hoping her tectonic determination and minimal use of language, revealed an understanding beyond her years.

What an extraordinary woman, the professor thought, finding he had to remind himself she had only just turned seventeen.

He knew her aura of maturity couldn't just be her life experiences, so it had to be in conjunction with insight - which he knew was very hard to teach - if not impossible. Nevertheless, what about her resolve for the task ahead? He decided to venture over to the Tree of Doubt, to see if he could shake a small bruised fruit off one of its low-lying branches.

'My dear girl,' he blustered slightly, 'Let me give you some very good advice. I have been here for nearly twenty-six years and have never seen anyone prove me wrong in this, so I implore you to reconsider. You will be trading the cream of your youth for late-night essay writing and lectures – a mistake which often ends in tears. 'Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast,'" he threw Shakespeare at her, 'Is very good advice indeed.'

Leah placed her glass on the table. "I hope you don't mind if I pass on that advice because I like to pass on good advice. It's the only thing to do with it," she fired back Oscar Wilde in riposte.

'What differentiates good advice from bad?' he asked quickly.

'Apart from the end result, there isn't much to distinguish them. But in my limited experience, 'the motive of the advisor seems to make the crucial difference,'" this time quoting one of her father's oft-repeated mantras, thinking it unwise to volunteer the source.

With a sliver of satisfaction Leah watched the professor languorously pull out a chair to sit down opposite her, the act had an air of resignation attached.

'Whoever said 'Youth is wasted on the young', was a genius who deserves to be better known.' He cocked the mischievous blue eye as he reached for the decanter to refill their glasses. 'I see now how you managed to pass the entrance exams with such ease. No mean feat at your age, or at any age for that matter. I did notice however, that on your English paper the '8' - the last digit of your birth date - looked very much like a 5. Which, if simply glanced at, would add three years to your age. Something I doubt most examiners would ever expect or check up on. This happened either by accident or through *design*,' he said, drawing out the word and looking at her intently, 'Because I found this to be the case on *all* your exam papers.'

Leah's heart skipped a beat then seemed to judder to a stop completely – his accusation was turning her blood to ice and she dare not speak in case her voice disclosed her deliberate deceit. Barely able to contain her neutral expression, she picked up her glass again and sipped.

Gazing up vacantly at the ceiling over her head, while tapping at his chin with a long tapering finger he mused aloud... 'They must have thought they were reading the paper of a twenty-year-old, thus not adding the intellectual snobbery and scorn they undoubtedly would have poured onto a seventeen-year-old's answers.'

The fact that he was absolutely right was not easing Leah's comfort level – his last comment had widened her eyes and bleached her face, for not only had he spotted her little ruse but correctly guessed her motive.

Busted. I'm absolutely busted, she thought fearfully.

Leah had intentionally styled her answers to reflect the views of an older student, to imply she was twenty. Believing this approach stood a better chance for success than shouting her youth, she had switched it around the other way, imprinting a '5' darkly on her exam papers and then tracing a thin line to make the diagonal and form the '8' – expecting any closer examination to exonerate her from the accusation of cheating. Once her Oxbridge entrance results had come through, she thought that particular door had closed behind her.

Looking up anxiously at the professor, Leah was surprised to see her acute concern reflecting back in his own expression. He was looking at her in a way that was... kind.

'Please don't trouble yourself. There is nothing to fear because your secret is safe with me. In fact, I applaud your ingenuity.'

Reaching across the table, the professor gently took her hand in his then turned it palm up before covering it with his other. With his green eye sparkling gold-dust in the evening sunlight, he spoke in the hushed tones of a conspirator.

'Funnily enough, it made me bang my foot down and insist I should interview you for your place here at Oxford. I give you my word that the only people who will ever know of your sleight of hand, are sitting in this room right now. You can be certain, because although I read your exam papers with the utmost care, by the time I re-filed them I happened to notice that they were all missing a corner of the first page. The corner which holds the DOB.' He pressed his hand into hers in the way he would secretly tip the *maitre d'* of a restaurant.

A wave of relief washed through Leah as the small pieces of paper were pressed into her palm, and she exhaled with a sigh whilst looking at him gratefully, in time to see, just for a moment, the glittering sparkle of unfathomable intelligence appear genie-like in his blue eye.

'It is my great honor to welcome you to Oxford University, Miss Mandrille. You will be the youngest girl I have ever taught.'

'Thank you so much, you won't regret your decision Professor Simmius.'

'My name is Victor. Feel free to use it, and never address me in private as Professor Simmius, or I will call you by the disconcerting name of Student Mandrille.'

'Thank you...,Victor,' she smiled, feeling her composure flooding back warmly, as a stronger feeling pricked at her perception, demanding to be heard. The bell of intuition was tolling loudly in her middle mind, revealing something she had rarely felt before; Leah somehow knew, with absolute certainty, that all secrets would be safe with this man.

As is often the way with instinct, she was nearly one hundred percent correct.

Victor beamed his smile at her again. 'Had you worried there for a moment, did I not? My apologies, but I had to be certain of both you and your commitment.'

'I can never thank you enough, Victor. But I would love to know who said 'Youth is wasted on the young', I've never heard that phrase before.'

'Some say George Bernard Shaw plagiarized Oscar Wilde. But nowadays, most people accuse me of the crime.'

Leah broke into laughter. It was contagious and as her second bout came around, Victor joined in.

THE WARRIOR

Sacramento

Waiting patiently in the heat, Ali glanced at the rifle on the blanket in front of him then checked his watch. It was 14:42. In eighteen minutes time, with a single shot, he would write a new chapter into the Book of Mankind. That is all it would take now...

One accurate shot.

He was lying on the roof of an elevator shaft at the top of an eight-floor office building, in the shadow of two large cardboard boxes he had filled with bricks. He peered down cautiously at the mêlée of cameramen and journalists waiting impatiently at the bottom of the steps leading up to the entrance of Sacramento City Hall.

Five days earlier the laser range finder had given him 253 yards distance-to-target; the awesome power of his gun meant the heavy bullet would fly 'flat,' ensuring that he would hit the target without having to compensate - or in sniper-speak - 'allow for the mark' by having to raise his aim to offset gravity's effect on the bullet.

Bullets fired from a gun aimed parallel with the ground fall at the same speed they drop from a hand; so the height of eight floors was a blessing as a bullet's descent is always calculated on the horizontal plane, while he was shooting downhill at a forty degree angle. He didn't want to make the classic rifleman error of shooting high over the mark, when aiming down at his target.

After much deliberation he had decided on an 11/4 inch offset. Then even if he was wrong it would make little difference.

To enhance the accuracy of his rifle it had a boss screw on the end - to the untrained eye - a silencer. It tuned the barrel so that it always flexed in exactly the same way when fired, neatly removing the ability of the bending barrel from fractionally altering the path of his bullet. When the Remington engineers' first bench tested the gun, they were surprised to discover it would shoot a 0.5-inch wide group of three bullets at 200 yards, and given the bullet itself was 0.3 of an inch wide, it effectively meant three bullets through the same hole.

High-tech and state-of-the-art, his rifle packed mind-stunning punch; delivering a heavy 200 grain bullet that was easily capable of felling a large elk or grizzly bear at 500 yards, while only dropping 20 inches over the distance.

'That's right, son,' the salesman had said proudly, 'With a Remington 300 Short Magnum, you just put fur on them crosshairs at 500 yards, and it's down. It'll hit that son of a bitch with 2300 foot pounds at that range. Most hunting rifles max-out at two-fifty.'

He was all too aware of the fact, and had guided the salesman to 'find' it for him while feigning ignorance throughout the process. But the rifle had an additional advantage, one that even the salesman had carefully avoided mentioning.

The noise it made was deafening.

He knew the sound wave would echo off the buildings surrounding the city center for two miles, making it impossible to locate his hiding place by ear.

It had taken him two days of discreet surveillance to select this particular position, and it couldn't be better. Not only did it meet all the technical requirements for the shot he was about to take, but it also provided him with a superb escape route. His safe exit was the deciding factor in choosing this specific building, from a previous shortlist of three. It also enabled him to face east and at 3pm the sun would be sitting directly behind the roof he was secreted on, making visual detection by the eyewitnesses surrounding the governor also impossible on this bright, cloudless day.

The heat was making the air suffocatingly still. Some reporters were holding up writing pads as a shield against the searing eye of the sun, making him smile inwardly.

The sun had always been a good friend, a trusted ally. He had spent most of his life in regions where this temperature was considered mild.

He watched a few of the photographers adjusting their camera focuses and then chuckled out loud when he realized the journo's did have one thing in common with him; they would be the last people to see the Governor of California alive, through a lens.

The irony wasn't wasted on him because this governor, like several of his predecessors, had been a movie star before stepping into the political arena. The man had lived his life in front of the lens, and in a few short minutes he would die by one. The same technology which had kissed the governor's life with fame and fortune was the very technology that would take it away. All it took for either to happen was now in place – a good man behind the lens.

And Ali Bin Mohammed knew he was a good man.

Truly, Allah must have led him to this place in time deliberately. If He had not ripped His divine links from the torsioned chain of Ali's existence, Ali would be leading a very different life. Surely the intervention and suffering he had experienced in his youth must have celestial approval? Because without this explanation, both he and the rest of the world were nothing more than rudderless ships, adrift on a windless sea of self-obsession.

'It is Allah's will, or I would have died before this,' Ali reminded himself, sweeping aside the unsettling thought of empty eternity.

Waiting motionless, feeling the tension of the coming moment draw near, he allowed his mind to wander along the switchback road of his life, over all the events which had brought him to this dividing point in the fate of the world. And he knew that without each of them occurring, he would probably be a doctor now as Mohammed, his father had always wished...

Saving life, not taking it.

When he was a boy, Ali's father had bought him a gun for his birthday and taught him how to shoot. Mohammed was a respected marksman and rumors abounded that he once shot dead four soldiers, with four consecutive shots, at a range of 300 yards.

His father had arrived home late for the evening meal on Ali's birthday that year, a thing he rarely did, believing in the importance of mealtimes as the keystone of family life. Heaven help Ali, his little brother or sister, if any of them were late for the daily ritual. Yet on this more special occasion of Ali's birthday, his father was late.

Memory of that day was still vivid in his mind. He could smell the aroma of his mother's stew as she spooned it into the bowl, chattering excitedly that she could see Mohammed carrying his birthday present.

'I'm sorry I am late, but I had to walk a long way to get this.' He explained as he gently placed the gift on the rug. 'I hope you will like it,' Mohammed beamed.

Ali picked up the bundle and to his delight unwrapped a small rifle – a .243 Mannlicher showing the signs of an active life.

Electrified with excitement, Ali mounted the gun to his shoulder and swung the rifle around, pointing at imaginary targets, shouting 'Bang, bang.' With a giggle he aimed the rifle at his sister sitting on the opposite end of the rug. There was a satisfying 'Click' as he pulled the trigger.

Mohammed went berserk.

'You stupid boy! Never point a gun at anyone!'

Ali could feel his tears forcing their way to the surface, but instinctively knew he must not cry – pouring weakness onto stupidity would only fan the flames of his father's fury. Forcing control over

himself, he looked up.

What he saw surprised him. Instead of the burning coals of his father's ire that he was expecting to see, worry and fear shone in his eyes.

Mohammed snatched the rifle away. 'I am confiscating it for a week as punishment for your stupidity. I thought you would behave responsibly, you foolish child.'

The urge to cry threatened to overwhelm him again but he managed to transform his lips into a pained smile, which he hoped his father would interpret as manly and strong.

Seeing his son was visibly upset, Mohammed relented, 'Perhaps I have been a bit harsh.'

'At dawn tomorrow Ali, we will both go into the orchard where you shall have your first shooting class.'

Ali slept in a fever of anticipation that night, awakening an hour before first light.

Getting out of bed he crept downstairs, lifted the wooden latch silently, then pushed the door open to find his father standing motionless, the gun mounted to his shoulder, leveled straight at him.

Ali froze in shock, transfixed by the dark eye of the rifle barrel which stared back its emptiness, unblinking.

'Terrifying isn't it? That's how it feels to have a gun held on you,' Mohammed said, dismounting the weapon, which broke the gun's mesmeric hold, granting Ali the function of his limbs.

They sat in silence as Mohammed drank two small cups of the thick sweetened coffee and then he picked up the rifle. 'It is time,' he announced.

They made their way up a beaten earth path which wound through their twenty-acre fruit orchard. When they were half-way up the slope Mohammed halted at a small clearing in the trees. 'This place is perfect.'

'There are some important lessons you must learn in life, Ali. But today, I am going to give you one of the most important lessons a father can teach his son. From now on you will no longer be a boy.'

'Now watch me carefully,' Mohammed's voice resonated in the stilled mystique of dawn. 'These are the bullets. This is the breech where you load them. Here is the safety catch, and only when you are about to fire should it ever be pushed forward.' Mohammed clicked it back with an exaggerated motion of his thumb, so Ali could see it was on 'safe.'

'Now for your first shooting class,' Mohammed said gravely, sliding the bolt which eagerly chaperoned a brass cartridge into the breech.

'First, I want you to swear a solemn oath. You will swear it on the soul of the Prophet,' Mohammed ordered. 'Repeat after me, I will never point a gun at anyone. Unless I am going to shoot them.'

Ali looked straight at his father. 'I will never point a gun at anyone, unless I am going to shoot them. I swear you this oath, on the soul of the Prophet.'

'Good. Never forget it. Now take the gun.' Mohammed said, passing it across.

The rifle was now pointing correctly, stock up and barrel down. Ali reached for it eagerly, but as his little hands took up the weight, Mohammed pulled the trigger. There was a blinding flash and a deafening bang. The gun recoiled viciously, hitting him hard under his left armpit, and although the impact helped push him over backward, Ali was instinctively set on the same trajectory – directly away from that shocking concussion. He threw his hands behind himself to soften his fall then looked up, to see his father's expression underscored by a wide grin.

His thumb on the safety catch, his finger curled tight around the trigger.

'Never aim a gun at anyone. Unless you intend to kill them. Now look down here,' Mohammed pointed his left hand at the ground. 'This is why you must obey your oath.'

Ali got up shakily and looked down. Two steps in front of him was a jagged hole, fully nine inches

round and over two feet deep.

'We will go inside and clean your gun. But before we do, I wish to ask, what is the lesson you have learned here today?'

Ali gazed at his father, hiccupped and swallowed the bitter bile which scalded the back of his throat. Frantically he searched his racing mind for an answer to match his upheaval. 'Is it to expect anything, Papi?'

'Correct, and that my son, is indeed a valuable lesson to learn.'

THE PSYCHOPATHIC, OR GUILTFREE

Amman

Children in a playground can be cruel, but children in an orphanage can be vicious past the point of savagery. The constant ache of their loss is sharpened on the lodestone of a loveless survival, to the twin points of anger and revenge, at far too young an age for it not to impact the remainder of their lives. Their impish behavior operates at its most powerful in troupes or gangs, and they generally pick on anything weaker, smaller, or different from themselves. Unfortunately for Fabio, he fitted all three categories perfectly. At twelve-years-old he was only four feet tall and thin from years of semi-starvation.

But it was his eyes that turned him into a target for their spleen. Instead of being an acceptable brown, one was green, the other a bright blue.

In panic, he looked around the dusty playground of the Amman orphanage, searching for any avenue of escape, but there was nowhere left to run.

Cornered, with too many of them to fight his way out, he was going to get a vicious beating.

The gang advanced on him haltingly, wary of his raised fists and desperate expression. For a boy so small and slight, his punches were painfully accurate and lightning fast. The whole gang had bitter memories of his ability to defend himself and none of them wanted to take a hit from those weaving hands.

A standoff ensued, until the leader shouted, '3-2-1... Get him!'

Seven boys lunged at him as one, but they hadn't seen the handful of coarse sand in his right fist. He flung it into their eyes, blinding three who recoiled, before a surge from the rear of the pack pushed them back and he was quickly overwhelmed.

A deluge of punches rained down and Fabio grunted with the blows, making each bruising hit sound as painful as possible. Then the battering intensified, forcing him to stagger sideways, as desperately, he battled to stay upright. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the rest of the pack diving over the other boys to attack him, their faces contorted with pent-up hatred.

In the moment before they grabbed hold, Fabio fell over backward pretending to be stricken.

The gang circled him, staring down at their prey writhing on the baked earth in agony.

Bashaar took control again. 'Pick him up,' he commanded.

They hoisted him by his limbs, and feeling their tight grip, Fabio went deadweight, taking all the sport out of their torment. His nonchalance quickly infected the gang who began to lose interest in carrying their burden.

Bashaar saw what Fabio was doing and leaned across his captive's limp form. 'I know, let's throw him down the well.' Then jumped back quickly, pointing and squealing with sadistic glee as Fabio began to struggle violently.

'Not the well, Bashaar. I can't swim, you'll kill me.'

'We've had enough of your lies,' Bashaar smirked, striding toward the well. Taking hold of the handle he wound the wooden bucket up from the dark water below. 'Put him in the bucket!' he ordered.

Four boys manhandled Fabio's feet into the bucket, forced his hands around the rope then instantly let go to watch him swing across the void.

'Oh dear,' Bashaar said quietly, making Fabio grip the rope for all he was worth. 'All those dates you've eaten are making you terribly heavy. I can't hold your weight any longer.' Letting go of the handle he laughed hysterically as Fabio dropped straight into the black like a convict on the gallows.

The buoyancy of the bucket combined with its speed threatened to crumple him to his knees as it

smacked down on the hard surface of the water, but he managed to hold on and not fall from the basket.

Jeers and laughter echoed down and then Bashaar's dark head invaded his small round patch of sky. 'If you piss in it we won't pull you out.'

This was vitally important as they all drank from the well, and his gang nodded sagely at their leader's wise words.

'If you admit to eating Hamid's dates, we will come and get you at sunset. Unless you really can't swim,' he joked. 'Then we will have to pull you out with a hook before you stink up the water.'

Fabio hadn't taken the dates. He felt certain it was Bashaar and foolishly he had told the bigger boy to check inside his own pockets first – right in front of the scowling boy's second-in-command. Fabio had fled, shouting his innocence, but someone had to pay for this theft and it wasn't going to be the 'godfather' of the most powerful gang in the orphanage.

'If I admit to stealing them, will you pull me out now?' Fabio called up his gambit.

'Course,' came Bashaar's instant reply.

'Okay, then pull me up and I will tell you how I did it.'

'Ha! You admit to it, I thought so. Tie off the handle,' he told the boy on his right. 'Hold onto the rope until we come back at sunset... and don't swim off anywhere,' he quipped, to even greater hilarity from his troupe.

Fabio waited until he was certain they had left him alone to his fate then began climbing the rope, getting half-way up before the ache in his arms and legs told him that he would never make it to the top. He slithered back down, the coarse rope burning the skin off his palms until his feet touched the wooden bucket. He collapsed into it with relief and plunged one of his hands in the cool water, trying to remove the fiery pain, before swapping it with the one holding the rope. The water provided an instant balm, but when he changed hands the pain seemed much worse. He gave up and started whimpering out loud, convinced he would not make it through the three long hours until sundown.

After what seemed like eternity Fabio heard a soft voice calling his name from above. Looking up, he saw a small head silhouetted against the blue. 'Shhh, say nothing,' the young voice whispered. 'We must be quiet. They are nearby. I will try to wind you up, but you must not say I got you out. You must tell them you climbed out on your own. Swear it on the soul of the Prophet.'

'I swear on the soul of the Prophet, that I will never say you helped me. Now pull me up. Please, I beg you,' he croaked back.

It was hard going but the little boy managed to inch him up to the surface, and as his hands touched the round wooden bar which coiled the rope, Fabio recognized his rescuer... It was Ali.

'I thank you for your mercy Ali Bin Mohammed,' he gasped, clambering out of the bucket onto solid ground. 'Come, let us get away from here.'

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A month later Victor arrived at the orphanage and took Fabio back to England. He had spent four desolate years looking for his lost son after the bombing of the Amman Hilton, which had wrought havoc on so many lives. It was doubly tragic in their case because the bombing also claimed Victor's wife, costing Fabio his mother.

Shell-shocked and dazed, Fabio had wandered away from the explosion into the slum quarter, where a kind man found him begging for food and took him in.

The kindness stopped the moment he got him alone.

One night and three terrible years of slavery later, Fabio spotted a knife gleaming at him from under the alabaster table opposite his bed. His molester used it for cutting up cakes of Lebanese hashish, which he sold to tourists in the expensive hotels by the beach at a hugely inflated price. In a stupor, the beast had dropped the knife before collapsing wearily onto his bed.

Fabio waited until the man's snoring reached floor-quivering height and then crept over to the table - feeding out his ankle chain with one hand - holding it clear of the floor with his other, to avoid waking the monster. The chain was just long enough to reach and stretching out, he managed to get hold of the sharp point and spin the knife toward him.

Standing motionless in the dark, he tested the edge of the blade in the moonlight reflecting off the ghost-white table and saw a thin black line appear like magic on his thumb.

He glanced at the man snoring contentedly in the corner of the room, but knew that his tether wasn't long enough to reach the man's wooden bed. Wisely, his tormentor had measured the chain and cut it to length, ensuring he could rest in peace.

Wiping the blade clean he crept back under his blanket.

At daybreak, as his abuser went about the ritual assault. Something he always did before attending Morning Prayer, Fabio slipped his hand under the pillow and took a firm grip on the knife handle. Marshaling all of his energy and concentration he whipped his arm around and punched the knife into the rapist's side.

To his horror the point of the blade jarred on the man's hip bone then stopped.

With a shocking strength the man grabbed Fabio's wrist and managed to drag the blade out, but instead of resisting Fabio went with it. Pulling his arm away from the wound he turned his wrist over to break the man's grip and stabbed the knife into him again.

The rapist let out a squeal of agony as the cold steel sliced into his entrails and then began shaking and convulsing as Fabio worked the knife, twisting and turning the blade.

The man was growing weaker and Fabio pulled the knife out then stabbed him again, the blade found the gap between his third and fourth rib and with an explosive gasp of pain he collapsed sideways onto the bed.

Fabio didn't hesitate, flipping over he leapt on him like a cat – stabbing frantically in a frenzy of fear and anger.

Only when certain the man was dead, did he begin sawing through the wire which bound his foot to the chain. It took him over an hour.

Halfway through his labors the man groaned out his death rattle, and Fabio, fearing he was still alive, stabbed the corpse repeatedly – churning the man's chest and stomach to a bloody pulp.

When he eventually freed himself from the shackle he went over to the bucket of water by his bed, washed the blood off his hands and body. He then quickly ransacked the room - but didn't find any money - so he took the hashish. As he put the last lump into a wicker basket his eye fell on the oil lamp next to the table. Picking it up, he carried it over to the bed and shook the oil out over the body.

Stepping back he took one last look at his torturer, spat on him and then struck a match and tossed it into the mess.

The flames attacked the corpse eagerly; they seemed to purge all trace and memory of the man with their hot, clean breath. All the self-doubt Fabio had harbored inside himself vanished as the heat withered the body.

Statue-still, mesmerized by the purity of the all-consuming flame, he stood watching the display, smiling for the first time in three miserable years. He made the solemn promise he would never allow self-doubt to devour him again. There would be no more inner anguish, no more sorrow, no pity and no remorse.

Not for anything, not for anyone.

Not even for himself.

From now on, the only thing he would regret in life was an act not done.

Fabio was so engrossed with the fabulous destruction of the corpse, that he waited until the last possible moment as the room filled with a thick black smoke, before walking calmly out of the house into the sanctuary of the street.

He managed to sell the hashish that same evening, but didn't realize the value of the money given in return. Because he had been brought up in Britain, Fabio wrongly assumed that ten thousand Jordanian Pounds was an enormous sum. But after the dealer had scurried off, he discovered to his horror that ten thousand would barely buy him breakfast.

The man had noted his pallor, and the rest was easy.

Two days later, Fabio ran out of money and started begging on a street corner, but didn't even make it 'til nightfall. One of the local gangs spotted him on their patch, and when he couldn't pay their 'tax' they beat him up in the park next to the Al-Omari mosque, warning that if they caught him at it again, it would be the last time.

An Imam from the mosque saw Fabio nursing his injuries and finding the boy was severely bruised and cut on his arm, took pity on him and drove him to a nearby hospital. As he handed over the money for his care, he told the doctors it was as much of his generosity as he could afford, but that he would prefer them not to reveal his name.

It took a full week for Fabio's bruises to fade to light blemishes, with the ward nurse trying every trick in the book to find out what had happened, but when he steadfastly refused to divulge anything about himself she grew wary and called the police.

The years of trauma had made him suspect everyone, and with the knowledge of his recent crime burning a hole in his mind, Fabio lied about his name and told the police nothing - except some vague detail about the bombing and how he was sure it killed his mother.

Hearing this the police relented and after a fruitless search to find his next of kin they passed him into the callous care of the orphanage. They felt it kinder than leaving him to beg on the streets, and believing he had not committed a crime they never recorded the incident. This compounded the tragedy of his life because if they had charged him with anything at all, his father would have found him sooner.

Ten months later the policeman who had driven Fabio to the orphanage noticed the reward Victor had posted in *Anmag*, the Amman newspaper. When he read the description of Fabio's eyes, he telephoned the number on the ad and told Victor where his son was staying.

Unable to get a flight for two days, the professor begged a favor off one of his political friends and they flew over in the man's private jet, landing at Amman Airport the following morning. Though it had been three years since he had last set eyes on his son, Victor recognized him immediately and brought him straight back to Oxford.

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At first things went well for them both, as Victor took on the role of teacher to bring his son's education up to speed in preparation for western schooling. He was amazed by how quickly his son picked up the lessons and after only twenty months, entered him into private school as a boarder, one year below his peer group.

This proved to be a dreadful mistake. Fabio wasn't liked by the other boys and they bullied him. Not with the same sadistic cruelty that he experienced in the orphanage, but they called him 'raghead' and forced him into servitude, deeply wounding his pride, until one break-time when a raspberry doughnut hit him on the back of his neck, splattering the thick red filling all over him...

Fabio exploded in fury.

He attacked the bigger boy with a speed and ferocity that knocked him straight down and as the bully rolled on the floor in a daze, Fabio picked up a wooden chair and began clubbing him with it. Fortunately, he was so wild that he didn't aim the blows or he would have caused serious injury, possibly worse.

Five boys rushed in to help their friend, shouting, 'Enough Fabio! That's enough!' Which did not have

the desired effect, and it took all of their combined strength to wrestle him to the ground.

The moment only two boys were holding him, Fabio launched himself at the bully again; landing three good kicks before they could pull him off.

To subdue him, they pushed him into a large laundry basket and buckled the leather straps tight. One boy sat on it, hitting Fabio's fingers with a ruler every time they crept out for the straps, while the other boys lifted their injured friend gently onto a bench and carried him to the school sanatorium, with a 3-inch long cut on his arm, extensively bruised ribs and a severe concussion.

'He sort of fell down the stairs,' they mumbled at the matron, which didn't fool her for a minute, and as soon as the boy was stable, she reported it.

The Headmaster called them all into his study and quickly got to the bottom of the incident; but as the truth unfolded he grew fearful and telephoned Victor, telling him to come and collect his son, adding that he might have to expel him.

Victor arrived at the school the next morning and listened to the gruesome event soberly, waiting for the right moment to pitch his pre-planned plea.

'Look Headmaster, two years ago I took him out of a very rough orphanage in the Middle East. Why not let me take him home for a week, and I will discipline him. As a trained teacher myself, I fully appreciate you will have to expel him if he behaves like this again. But we have a duty to educate all children, do we not? Which should include the more traumatized ones. Isn't that the real challenge of our profession? Why not interview him next week and see if you can take him back? I implore you.'

'Traumatized is an understatement,' the Headmaster replied gravely, 'Thirty years of teaching and I thought I'd seen it all. But the savagery of his attack! His violent use of a chair is abhorrent. Abhorrent and dangerous. I mean, good grief, he could have killed the boy!'

'But he was provoked. And I understand from him that he has been bullied daily since I placed him in your care,' Victor countered, carefully playing the only ace in his hand.

'Yesss, I too was surprised to learn that,' the Headmaster said, a little unconvincingly, 'Perhaps this is an exceptional circumstance. Two years is little time to adjust to our culture and a more civilized way of doing things. I'll tell you what. Bring him back after half-term and we'll start again. But if he repeats this behavior, in any way whatsoever, he must leave immediately.'

'Thank you for your understanding,' Victor said gratefully before collecting his son from the ante-chamber outside the Headmaster's study.

Four days before the end of that same school term, Fabio nearly drowned a boy who ducked him from behind in the swimming pool. Only the quick intervention of the coach, diving in fully clothed, prevented a real tragedy.

In utter outrage he marched Fabio straight into the Headmaster's office; demanding serious punishment - saying he refused to have him in any more of his classes.

Fabio was expelled.

After a turbulent nine months of applications and rejections, no school would take him, and reluctantly Victor took a sabbatical to resume his son's tuition.

In this however he was not disappointed. He was surprised...

Very.

The speed at which Fabio could memorize a page and repeat it word-for-word was astonishing.

Victor surreptitiously invited a child psychiatrist over for dinner, and after eating together to gain Fabio's confidence they sat on the floor in front of a blazing winter fire and played 'games' before he went up to bed.

When the two men were seated alone, the doctor looked at Victor thoughtfully. 'There's no doubt that

his memory is extraordinary – in layman's terms 'photographic'. He got only two cards from the entire deck wrong. That doesn't mean he understands what he memorizes, but it does mean he can recall almost anything he has read or seen – parrot-fashion at the very least.'

'That's handy for passing exams,' Victor observed.

'It's handy for passing exams like science, math and history,' corrected the psychiatrist.

But everything else proved worrisome. Victor was forced to keep his son at a distance from the local boys to prevent the fighting which invariably broke out. So to make up for his isolation Victor bought him a games computer – promising a different game each month. He was slightly disturbed by the subject matter that his son invariably picked out, all of which had a violent theme - but when he tried to suggest alternatives Fabio would retort, 'Get real dad. Even Tom and Jerry is violent.'

'As long as you keep up your studies, you can have whatever you wish,' Victor encouraged, desperate to avoid any further confrontation and in the belief that Fabio would get a full scholarship at any university he chose.

The offer letters from four universities arrived in mid-August and they sat down to discuss them. To Victor's annoyance Fabio announced that he was enrolling in the university where his mother had won her degree - Cairo University - studying Computer Science and Economics. They rowed, with Fabio storming up to his room shouting that in one month's time when he was eighteen, there would be nothing Victor could do to stop him. In the weeks that followed there were many heated discussions, which often ended in acrimony. They would lock horns until Fabio began screaming that his father's work had ransacked his country and helped cause the death of his mother – a barb which tore into Victor's heart - a barb he strongly suspected his son was all too aware of.

One rainy morning the professor came downstairs to find a hastily written letter propped against an empty coffee mug on the breakfast table. In it Fabio explained that he had left for Cairo University and that by the time his father read the note, he would 'already be on the 7:30 am flight.' It went on to vilify everything his father stood for or believed in; ending with the vicious postscript, 'Don't call me, I'll call you.'

He never did.

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Arriving in Cairo, Fabio enrolled and managed to get a part-time job in a restaurant to help pay his way through the three-year course. He worked as a waiter and with his spare money he signed up for two correspondence courses, one in America, one in Tel Aviv. Unusually, he chose exactly the same degrees; Computer Science and Economics, but with an emphasis on Security Software.

After getting his Bachelor of Science degree three times over, he was headhunted for an analyst position at a Swiss investment bank. It didn't take Fabio long to pick up the nuances of the business and he was quickly promoted. In his second year, the bank asked him to project-manage the build of a medium-sized computer system that would automate the complexities of the bank's foreign exchange division.

It became obvious to Fabio, at an early stage, that the budget was insufficient. But instead of alerting his boss he reduced the scope of the system and took to working late - copying the best parts of the developing programming - then splicing in additional functionality with his own code. As a result, he dramatically enhanced the system he built. But Fabio only passed on the software the bank was expecting him to deliver.

When the beta test ended successfully he handed in his notice, stole his employment contract with its non-disclosure agreement, and left.

He went on safari, hunting four of the Big Five for six months and then took his superior software to the competitor banks. They paid top dollar to have his enhanced trading system, as they were all competing on the same foreign exchange markets, mainly against each other. A system with far greater functionality, delivering better information one thousand times faster than their in-house software, was

an advantage they did not want their competitors to have the sole rights over.

'To make the substantial profits of your competitors, you must compete on a level playing field,' became Fabio's sales close, and his company mushroomed rapidly, until one evening, on an overnight flight to New York, the man seated next to him in the first class cabin leaned over and whispered, 'We have need of you,' in perfect Cairene, the ancient Egyptian dialect of the street.

'How did you know I was Egyptian?' Fabio lied smoothly.

'We know many things about you. We have watched you for over a year. We even know who killed your mother in Amman. Would you like to know who he is, and where? I am authorized to tell you.'

Fabio fixed a still blue eye on the man to hide his flash of anger. 'Of course I would,' he said evenly.

'He's sitting right next to you,' came the shocking reply.

When the flight took off from Geneva, Fabio had been a millionaire who owned a small software house. By the time he landed in New York he had accepted the position of CEO, with a fifty-one percent share-holding in a new foreign exchange fund, a fund with initial cash reserves of two billion dollars; the first tranche of money he processed through his new company.

'We must rewrite the software platforms, to steal a march on the other banks' trading desks.' Fabio said as he shook the same hand that had triggered the bomb which killed his mother. One day you will be brought before me to watch your family being tortured. Then after your own suffering, you will beg me to end your filthy life, he comforted himself with the thought, while smiling warmly at the man.

'It will take eight months to complete and it will pay us not to announce that I am the CEO. I wonder, could you arrange another identity for me?'

'That is an excellent precaution. How many would you like?'

When Fabio returned to Geneva, he was Abdul-Aliyy Saqr Khalifa – the man who became known for marrying the modern banking system of the west, with the ancient financial network of the east. Hawala had opened its largest vault to the west for the first time in six centuries – opening it exclusively through him.

Fabio had carefully chosen his new identity, in the full knowledge that only those supplying his investment funding would know what the name meant. The western banks, from which he carved their joint fortunes, were unaware at the time that Arabic names all have ancient meaning – so they had no idea to look into it. Abdul's delighted Arab backers knew it would be foolish to point it out to them – so they never did. In fact, it amused them greatly to know that Abdul-Aliyy Saqr means...

The Falcon Servant of the Most High; extremely fast and rarely seen, yet pinpoint accurate and deadly.

In private conversations between themselves, his backers referred to him in code as 'The Hawk.'

He became fabulously wealthy over the ensuing five years, counting the heads of several governments as personal friends.

Abdul Khalifa was known to support many charities, especially orphanages, and insisted on meeting the children in person - an unusual act for a man in his position - and more than a little dangerous, as the care homes he set up were always situated in war-ravaged, shattered parts of the world.

Mr. Khalifa was also known for setting one pre-condition before granting any funding. He would stipulate that English was properly taught as a language. As he was happy to underwrite the additional cost, his offer was readily accepted. With those benefiting from his philanthropy thinking him exceptionally generous, in both the size of his donations and his extraordinary personal effort.

Then one crisp morning, just as the leaves were beginning to fall in Central Park, Abdul Khalifa sold all of his shares on the New York Stock Exchange for 7.1 billion dollars...

And vanished.

THE ELDER

Oxford

Arriving early, Leah took out her key to Victor's rooms. She was the only student who had one. The professor had given her a key to stop her banging on the door... 'It sounds exactly like gunfire,' he said, handing her the key as if it were fashioned from freshly minted gold.

Leah knew that wasn't the real reason, but enjoyed the thought that the professor trusted her, and walking into the small kitchen in the back, she put away the ingredients for their Wednesday evening supper.

Victor had insisted that if she were to take up her place at Oxford whilst only seventeen, she should have dinner with him once a week to ensure everything went smoothly in her first year. They had settled on Wednesdays, and then carried on the arrangement throughout her second, third and fourth years.

Leah was looking forward to the special treats they had for their evening meal; smoked sturgeon to start, veal marsala to follow. An appropriate choice as tonight's conversation would be conducted in Italian. The previous week they had dined on spiced lamb, speaking High Arabic throughout their meal as they batted their intellects back and forth across the dining table.

At first she thought him highly eccentric, but now knew better. There was a curious, chess-like logic to his reasoning.

Walking back into the main study, she caught sight of her reflection in the gilded mirror hanging over the fireplace. She spent a few minutes perfecting her make-up, before pulling the clip from her long, dark hair to let it swirl around her shoulders.

She had become an attractive woman, leaving behind the ungainliness, and at times, awkwardness that she felt in her teens. Her green eyes were shot with diamonds and acted as the perfect foil for her high cheek bones and full-lipped, sensual mouth. Leah half-turned, peering over her shoulder to see how her bottom and legs looked in the light blue dress and matching stockings she had put on her credit card that day. Casting a critical eye over her reflection, an effervescent feeling of beauty fountained inside her, causing her to smile knowingly at the mirror.

Her clear complexion and seemingly innocent aura had not gone unnoticed by her fellow students. Leah had indulged a few of their passes, but when she mentioned that she was committed to a career abroad, and was only interested in a 'friend with benefits' relationship, they got angry or drifted away.

This was certainly not a fault of Victor's. The first time they had dined together Leah had carefully monitored his speech and actions, looking to expose any hint of 'Dirty-old-man-itis', but to her relief there was no trace of it, and the relationship had blossomed along a different path, becoming more father/daughter than professor/student.

She guessed that their suppers afforded him the privacy to speak his mind without his private thoughts being judged or relayed to others, whilst giving her the opportunity to view an astounding intellect.

Sensing the door opening, she turned to greet him.

'Bon journo,' he smiled, pushing it shut. The years hadn't bowed him. He stood tall and lean, radiating an easy confidence that was only mitigated by his insatiable curiosity. Victor was a man who knew his own mind and lit his own path with the brilliance of intellect. His white hair hadn't thinned at all during the time she had known him, and his hands were tapered and beautifully shaped – the hands of a surgeon or concert pianist. But it was his eyes that moved him into the magical – they were bright, soul-searching and burned with life. The green one had an unsettling habit of looking deep into her, sometimes questioningly, while the blue one seemed flecked with whatever emotion he was feeling at the time. Today, it looked concerned.

The forty-seven years between them dissolved into the ether, and she listened as the fluidity of his

Italian poured into the room. 'Care for a Negroni?' He asked as he weaved around the piles of books, heading for the antique drinks cabinet. 'I'm going to have something a little purer.'

'I'd love a Negroni,' she replied in Italian.

'Would you mind if we switched into English?' He asked abruptly.

'No, but why?' she queried his unusual request.

'Because English is the most accurate medium for the topic I want to discuss. It has more words in it, than any other language we speak.'

'You mean English has a larger vocabulary.'

'Please don't be anal, Leah.'

'Oh come now, Victor, I'm not the one who spells 'anal-retentive' with a hyphen,' she flipped him back with a smile.

'Precision is a weight I carry..., alone unfortunately,' he said, marking the air with his index finger.

'That's funny,' Leah laughed. 'But I detect an ominous tone. I hope the topic's not going to be tedious.'

In an exaggerated voice he continued, 'At the risk of bringing the ticking of the clock to the forefront of your mind, may we discuss something of particular interest to me? You can let me know if it bores you.'

'I cannot hear an Edwardian grandfather clock ticking away behind me,' Leah replied straight-faced, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

He gave a momentary smile before turning more serious. 'I want this conversation kept strictly between us. You are not to mention it or discuss it with anyone. And you must never use it in an essay, even if it's one for me.'

'Keep a secret in return for an intrigue? I can't resist. What's the subject?'

'Family secrets, actually.'

'Tick-tock!'

'Ha! I hope you don't think me rude, but I have a weight on my mind that I would like to share.'

'A problem shared is a problem halved, Victor. Share away.'

'You've got to realize first that I was old by the time I was twenty, but young by the time I was forty, and the young tend to make the same mistakes. Unfortunately, by the time I made my biggest one I had the experience to know it could happen. *'Be sure your sin will find you out,'* he quoted, downing his glass. The professor then put it on the table then collapsed dismally on the chaise-longue.

He really is upset, Leah thought as the feminine urge to soothe his pain melted into her, lending tenderness to her reply, 'What mistakes could upset you this badly?'

'It's the understanding that when good meets evil, it may be hard to distinguish them. As you know, Leah, I have a son. In my late twenties I fell in love and married a Jordanian - Kamilah. She was a wonderful woman; I've never met her equal. Anyway, my wife and son were staying at a hotel in Amman waiting for me to join them there, after I was delayed by some work for the French Government. It had dragged on, as it always does with them, but when I did eventually arrive I was given the horrific news that they were among the victims of a bombing that had destroyed the hotel the night before. We found her body, but not his. I searched high and low with every spare moment I had, for over three years I searched, before I eventually found him in an orphanage. I brought him straight out of that dreadful place and back home here, to the UK. But when he was eighteen he left home for Cairo University, refusing all contact with me.

Ten years ago I came across his tracks. He had just sold his company and there was a small picture of him in the Financial Times. I tried to contact him, but without success, then I bumped into him at a conference in Geneva. I soon discovered why I had not been able to get in contact. He had changed his

name to Abdul-Aliyy Saqr Khalifa. Anyway, we had dinner together and over the next few weeks, spent a lot of time together.'

Leah re-filled his glass from the crystal decanter and passed it across. 'Go on.'

'We got on well, and I grabbed the opportunity to re-build our relationship with both hands. Then one Champagne-fuelled evening he asked if there was any way to re-balance the injustices of the world. Stupidly, I let my guard down and showed him the Achilles Heel of the West; how easily social order could be dismantled.'

'You did what?' Leah said, aware she might not like the answer.

'I gave him the solution to the ultimate political crisis.'

'The ultimate political crisis? A solution to tyranny? You mean a dictatorship?'

'Please understand that I was only trying to build a bridge with him, a connection that was cruelly denied us by a twist of fate in the Middle East. For a long time we lost each other, then afterward he never really forgave me. Or forgave anyone for that matter.'

'Only lovers, good friends and families can feud - so you have my sympathy. But what did you tell him that could worry you this much?'

'I told him the way to bring down established government. Curiously, a way that will also work more effectively against any large government. By that I mean any government which controls large numbers of people. I have been all too aware of it for the past thirty years, and with the exception of my son, I have never breathed a word of it. Until now.'

Without moving Leah looked at him intently.

Victor held her gaze. 'It's rather drastic. Or as some might say - revolutionary. You see there is an inherent weakness in organized societies - in all organized societies actually - even the most democratic ones.'

He drained his glass. 'I have three reasons for divulging my strategy to you. The first is, I do not want my son to be the only one who knows it. The second is, it may become necessary to implement this in your lifetime. Heaven forbid, but I think a dictatorship will emerge and take over the West in fifteen to twenty-five years' time. The gate through which they will drive their iron tank of control will swing open as politicians' accountability to voters dissipates - a result of fewer politicians representing larger numbers of people. The first warning sign will be over-regulation; a surge in the number of minor laws dished out. The second sign will be an escalation of police clamp-downs, together with the meting out of summary justice and the building of super-jails. The last sign will be a rapid acceleration in military spending. Should it happen to Europe first, you will also witness the re-introduction of the death penalty.' He paused, 'I like to think you and I have become close. I know I can trust you, and unlike my son, I know your heart is good. I am greatly indebted for your kindness and consideration of me, so I am sorry to burden you with this knowledge, but I must. If only to safeguard your own future.'

'What is the third reason?'

'I can see the end of my days approaching.' He held up his hand to forestall her protest. 'Come now, Leah, it's only fair that the Jaws of Death toast me at some point..., with their single malt, I trust.'

'You're procrastinating, Victor. What did you tell your son?'

'When talking with the Angel of Death, I imagine procrastination is a very useful skill.'

'Victor, if you don't tell me with your very next breath, I will speed the introductions myself.'

'There is a possibility that my son will implement what I told him, and forewarned is forearmed.'

'Okay, that's quite enough. I'm touched by your trust but if you don't tell me what it was this instant, I will scream you to death.'

'In many ways, he's not unlike you.'

'Ahhhhhhhhhh.'

'Okay calme. Calmati. I'll tell you. All societies have a deep fissure, a gap that is filled by the rule of law. The law is the mortar in the House of all Social Order. Remove it, and the structure collapses. Ordered society falls into smoking ruin. It disintegrates into rubble. A rubble ruled by the rabble.'

'I'm starting to feel operatic again.'

'Alright, well the medicine has to be pretty strong, so I would start a small war.'

'A *small* war? Victor, small wars conducted against big brothers don't stay small for long,' Leah said in earnest.

'Perhaps 'war' is too strong a word. Let's call it an attack. An attack against which there is no defense. To ensure it stays small, let's say you limit your force to a few.'

'Are you suggesting only a few people could take down large governments like Russia, China or the United States? Without mass casualties?'

'I am. Of course it would have to be a new type of attack – completely original - one the world has not yet experienced or even imagined could happen. It would take time and careful planning, access to large amounts of money and a meticulous intellect to conduct operations. But once set in motion, it wouldn't take long.'

'How long?'

'Oh, four to six months, luck depending,' he said, stroking the top of the dining table as if it were a favored pet.

Leah leaned her elbows on the table. 'How's this? You tell me how to take down a superpower with only a small force, in under six months, and I will put myself at ease by shredding your idea.'

'Okay, I'll spell it out for you,' and to her mounting horror, he did.

The idea itself was terrifying without his clever tweaks and practical ways to implement it, but what surprised her most about his plan was that it was not directed at those who ruled.

The target was the rule of law.

It was the most destructive mechanism that she had ever heard. In his own inimitable way he had christened the plan quite inappropriately, but with needle-point accuracy...

'The Sword of Damocles.'

His sword would scythe down the law, destroying all social order. Destroying it in months, not years.

Worse, no-one would have any contingency for it, nor could they. Once implemented it would be unstoppable.

Ultimately, this was why Victor had kept it sacrosanct, because even the architect of the plan had no shield against 'The Sword', once it was cutting down a defenseless world.

Listening to him explain it in detail, she saw why he had kept it secret - if the idea ever got into the public domain, there were many who would delight in carrying it out.

'In the end, Leah, the collective thought that rises up from my stratagem will utterly destroy the law. And with it, the legal system. Even the police will turn against the rule of law shockingly fast. The Sword of Damocles will bring a populace to the point where no-one wants the law in place, because it won't be on their side but against them. This will be driven by the fact that having the law operating in any form will make ordinary survival difficult. Therefore, you are better off without it. Once that understanding gains momentum, it's over. You must never forget how dangerous The Sword is, because it doesn't need a tyrant in control for it to work. It would roll out just as effectively if Gandhi himself were the nation's leader. I want you to promise me that you will only draw this sword if my foresight about a coming dictatorship proves correct. And only then, when there is no alternative.'

'You have my word,' Leah said solemnly.

'I have one last request; if I am wrong about tyranny happening in your lifetime, then you must pass my final solution onto someone you trust implicitly before you depart this earth. Be careful who you entrust it with. More careful than I have been.'

'But if there are three people in the world who know this - that's three people too many.'

'I'm glad you do not underestimate its power. Because that means you understand it and will keep it to yourself.'

'Before you told me about The Sword, I never felt knowledge was a burden. Now I understand why you use that phrase.'

'Personally Leah, I feel a blissful sense of release in handing you this weapon,' he said, euphoria tinting his blue eye. 'Keep my sword well hidden, and understand that it is my sincere hope and wish you never have cause to wield it. However, I think the chances are high that you will have no choice.'

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Walking back to her rooms later that evening, immersed in her newfound, deeply disturbing knowledge, Leah heard a distant bell strike once, carried from afar by a thick fog which had crept in soundlessly from a cold North Sea.

For the first time in her life she felt the sharp splinter of fear. But when she tried to track its source, her mind kept reverting to the other person who knew about The Sword of Damocles, Victor's son, Fabio.

I wonder why he changed his name to Abdul-Aliyy Saqr Khalifa. People often change their name to hide something, but what? she thought, as she made her way through the damp, dark night to her room.

Of one thing too she could never be certain – would Fabio ever divulge the plan to anyone?

No wonder Victor was wracked with concern about his son.

Fabio would surely never wield The Sword, would he? Not unless there was already a rope around the neck of mankind?

It was the one thing she hoped beyond hope that Victor was wrong about. But the problem being that if Victor was wrong, in her experience it would be the very first time.

THE DESCENDANTS OF THE KILLER APE

Sacramento

The insistent wailing of an alarm crashed in on Ali's thoughts making him jump up quickly. In his urgency, he momentarily forgot the weight on his back and nearly toppled over sideways.

Making sure of his balance with each step, he crouched his way over to the left side of the roof desperately hoping the alarm wasn't raised because of him. But as he bent down to look over the edge it ceased abruptly, and after searching a moment for signs of disturbance, he started to make his way back to his blanket, freezing motionless as a helicopter clattered overhead to land on the helipad of City Hall.

The Governor of California was arriving in style.

Ali looked at his watch again. Only six minutes had passed since he had last checked it. I need to keep calm. This is not an easy shot and I only get one chance... he reminded himself.

Minutes later the sounds of bustling excitement bubbled up to Ali from the steps of Sacramento City Hall, breaking his reverie.

He peered down cautiously to see the waiting press corps react to the movement of a security guard swinging open the large glass door of the entrance.

A group of men and women threaded their way out in a line, dressed in smart clothes for California - very conservative suits. They filed down the steps robotically, forming into three orderly rows at the side of the podium...

Fifty feet away from it.

They were under strict instruction to do so; the recently elected governor enjoyed the limelight focused solely on himself. On his first day in office, he had issued a memo forbidding all staff to stand anywhere near him - or wherever the cameras might pick them up - as he was photographed going about his stately duties.

One of the staff loyal to the previous governor had forwarded the memo to The San Francisco Times, which had gleefully splashed the edict right across the center of the front page. The accompanying editorial went on to describe the arrogance of the new 'People's Favorite', asking whether Californians were about to be ruled by 'spin, not substance'.

When the governor finished reading the article he flew into a rage, instigating the first of many witch-hunts and fired five people on the spot - none of whom were guilty of the act. But when Ali finished reading the article, he saw how perfect the man was - *as a target*.

Not only was the governor a bastion of American culture, a hero of war movies, but by insisting on standing on his own could be shot without anyone getting in the way of the bullet. This had prompted Ali's scrutiny of the governor's habits in order to unearth his weaknesses, and it didn't take him long to discover the man's vulnerable side, the Governor of California had an unselfish streak - he liked to share his pearls of wisdom in public - and often.

In my faith, vanity is a deadly sin, Ali smiled to himself.

14:56. Only four minutes to go. It's not too late to pull out. I could simply pack up and walk, no-one the wiser, he thought.

But he knew there were too many people relying on him now to deliver. He was only a small, albeit crucial piece of the terrifying jigsaw about to be clicked into place, and with a twinge of regret Ali dismissed the notion. His mission to assassinate the governor was only the beginning. The real glory would come at the end, when he orchestrated the fear and chaos that would bring America crashing to its knees in a few short months.

To occupy himself for the tense minutes before taking the shot, he allowed his mind to flick back to when this had all started. To a terrible night so long ago - but which haunted him as though it happened only yesterday.

He was sleeping peacefully in his bed on a warm September evening, when he was woken up by a strange noise coming from the mud-packed road which dead-ended at his home. Staring out of his small bedroom window, he watched it coming, clouds of blue smoke billowing in its wake, the roar of the diesel engine growing louder as it accelerated along the last one hundred yards.

It appeared to his thirteen-year-old mind like a ravening monster seething with malice, as it raged through the night. Ali felt a choking fear crush his throat dry as it screeched to a halt, twenty yards from their house. Lights erupted from all over it, illuminating their home in a sterile whitewash, as the long barrel whirred down to level with the front door.

The commander stood up in the turret, waving at the soldiers clinging to the sides of the tank to disperse.

They jumped off quickly then fanned out to surround the house.

The second his men were all in position the commander lifted a megaphone to his lips, the young voice ringing out so sharply that Ali could hear the strings of his mother's lute in the kitchen hum their distress.

'This is the Heavy Armor Division. You are completely surrounded and an incendiary shell is zeroed on your house. Come out with your hands up – naked. You have one minute to comply before we fire. I repeat, you have one minute to undress and walk out with your hands up. That minute starts now.'

The officer lifted his arm theatrically and looked at his watch. Though young, he was nobody's fool. He had seen more than his fair share of this hard and bitter conflict.

It made him vigilant.

He knew the tactics of the rebels included the hiding of explosives and grenades in their clothing, which they would detonate in a final act of defiance. The best way was to arrest all suspects with their clothes off. It not only made the arrests safer, it also took all the fight out of their civilian enemy, humbling and humiliating the men, while some of the women were shamed into suicide afterwards.

At that moment Mohammed rushed into Ali's bedroom, tears welling in his eyes as he spoke. 'If anything happens to me, Ali, you must take my place as the head of the family. Remember the Five Pillars of Islam? There is a little money buried under the fifth apricot tree; five rows up and five across from the ditch. Whatever happens tonight, you must first take care of our family. Do whatever these people say, and above all, do not attempt anything heroic. Do this for me, and if the worst happens I will greet you in paradise. Remember, you must do *exactly* what they say. I will go first and give myself up. You must follow with your mother, brother and sister.'

In the room next door, Ali could hear his little brother start to cry, then his mother telling him to hush and be brave before asking Kamsen, his twelve-year-old sister, to help calm him. 'We must be brave my little brother,' Kamsen whispered. 'If you are not quiet something terrible will happen.'

Anxious and frightened the family gathered in the narrow corridor before filing downstairs to re-assemble in the kitchen.

Ali watched his mother wipe away the silent tears that were filling her eyes, as his father took her in his arms and kissed her, saying, 'Sssh, sssh my beloved. We must be strong now. As long as we do nothing to provoke them, everything will be alright. We must give ourselves up. I will go first and then Ali. You and the children must follow.'

The tank commander's voice boomed out, '25 – 24 – 23...'

Mohammed half-turned, he glanced nervously at the three alabaster windows radiating a shadowless glare through the room.

At '20' the soldiers joined in with the chant. Some slightly out of tempo with the main group, sounding

weary.

Pulling off his nightshirt Mohammed walked swiftly to the front door, squared his shoulders, then stood his full height as his hand fell on the latch. Naked but proud he looked at his huddled family with an expression of deep sadness, mouthed 'I love you all,' then pushed open the door to stride into the floodlights.

'Good,' came the metallic voice. 'Now walk toward the light..., stop. Lie on the ground face down. Spread your arms and legs..., wider.'

Ali watched his father obey, thinking this wouldn't be as hard as stealing from the market. He began to undress, motioning at the others to do the same.

'I will go first,' Ali copied his father's lead. 'Then you Mama, then Hassan and then you, Kamsen. Remember what Papi said. Are you ready?'

His mother and sister had an arm across their breasts, a hand over their groins. A desperate attempt to hide their nudity.

Kamsen shivered uncontrollably in the warm night air.

The voice from the loudhailer boomed out again, 'We know there are more of you in there. Come out or we will fire.'

'We must go,' Ali urged, trying to make his voice sound as steady as his father's. 'If we obey them, we have nothing to fear. You must be brave and not cry, Hassan,' he added, adopting the same technique Kamsen had used to soothe his younger brother. 'Are you ready? Now follow me and nothing bad will happen.' Ali thrust his chin out and walked into the sterile white sheet of the halogens, casting backward glances at the rest of his family.

'Good,' the voice barked. 'All of you put your hands up and walk toward the light..., stop. You at the front, walk to your left. The rest stay where you are..., stop. Now lie face down and spread your arms and legs.'

Ali dropped to his knees then flopped forward doing exactly as instructed.

'Now you! The woman! Move to your right..., stop. Lie face down.' Ali's mother closed her eyes then sank to the ground in the crucifix position. 'Now spread your legs..., wider.'

The soldiers let out a raucous jeer. Some giggled nervously and pointed, some made ribald comments.

'Now you two. Move apart.'

Hassan and Kamsen obeyed.

For the first time the soldiers could see Kamsen clearly and they switched their attention to her. One, with a swagger of authority, walked toward her cat-calling, which set off the rest of the pack who started competing with each other for the lewdest comment. Cackling like hyenas they bared their teeth in wide wolfish grins of relief, while feasting their eyes lustfully on the twelve-year-old girl.

Kamsen dropped to the sanctuary of the soil at her feet and began squirming and wriggling in the dust, a frantic attempt to cover herself.

The man strolling toward her was a sergeant. He took his time walking over to Kamsen. Stamping his feet down on either side of her, he stood for a moment, drinking in her nudity before placing the tip of his rifle between her legs.

'I hope you've got something explosive in there,' he called out to shrieks of laughter from the pack. 'I'd better make certain, where are my gloves...?'

Slinging the rifle over his back, he leaned across her quaking form, took a firm grip on each of her bare buttocks, then wrenched them apart to inspect his prize, hard-eyed.

A soundless flicker of movement caught Ali's attention and he moved his head a fraction, in time to see his father roll onto his back and kick the guard standing over him. The soldier, engrossed in the show,

didn't see it coming until Mohammed's speeding foot lifted his testicles.

There was a crunch and he bent over double, dropping his gun into the waiting hands of Mohammed. Cradling the rifle like a newborn infant Mohammed rolled over once, coming up elbow-on-knee in the classic position of a marksman.

Aiming as low as he dared at the sergeant, Mohammed gently squeezed the trigger allowing the natural tendency of the semi-automatic to ride up through the man's body. The first bullet hit the sergeant's thigh; the second shattered his hip; the next three slapped into his torso with the sound of an axe chopping wood. The last bullet found the gap in the sergeant's Kevlar jacket just below his armpit, it ricocheted off the inside of his shoulder joint and took the path of least resistance, ripping through his chest cavity; tumbling through his intestines; exiting from his groin.

He fell across Kamsen, convulsing and jerking his life away in a macabre parody of the act of love, clothing her with his life's blood.

Until Mohammed fired, the other soldiers were too absorbed to notice him. It took two full seconds for them to react.

Mohammed dived toward the tank and scooted underneath it. He was now behind the lights and invisible to the soldiers, but some fired anyway, hitting the tank and the man standing next to it.

'Turn on the rear lights,' screamed the frantic voice from the loudhailer.

There was a 'click' and Mohammed was illuminated in the open, sprinting for the safety of his orchard. He was ten yards short when fourteen soldiers fired as one.

Mohammed collapsed like a ragdoll, dead before his knee hit the ground.

In desperation Ali glanced around. No-one was looking in his direction. Terrified he would be next Ali decided to follow his father's example, rather than heed his advice.

Getting up in one fluid movement, he bolted for the pitch-black shadow at the side of the house, but just as he approached the edge of the light there was a shout from behind. His foot tripped on a stone and he went down hard as bullets snapped over him.

'No-one move or you will all be shot. I repeat. Do not move!' shouted the commander.

Ali complied willingly, he froze.

Peering through half-closed eyelids he could see most of the soldiers aiming at his mother, brother and sister. Two were aiming at his dead father, but only one was pointing a rifle at him.

'They think I'm dead,' he realized, watching the man nearest him drop his gun barrel then call out to the others, 'Reloading.'

As the soldier unclipped the magazine from his rifle, Ali leapt up and streaked for the sanctuary of the dark ten feet away. Shots splattered the ground around him, the ricochets howling away into the night as he swerved into the darkness, his hands clawing at the air to pull himself forward.

Fear gifted him speed as he took a diagonal line through the orchard, away from the soldiers, and Ali didn't stop until he reached the top of the hill, where a thick bamboo hedge met the ditch that drained the orchard in winter.

Crouching behind a tree trunk, he looked back anxiously to see if any of the soldiers had followed. His relief on seeing no-one was quickly replaced by a feeling of utter helplessness.

What can I do against so many men? There's only one thing to re-balance these odds – a gun. But the guns are locked in the kitchen, in full view of the tank, he thought.

Then a distant bark from the neighboring farm, reminded him of the old Martini action .270 in his father's study. His father used it for shooting the wild, mostly rabid dogs which scavenged the orchard in the late summer months.

Stealing quietly along the boundary path that skirted the orchard before bending around the back of

the farm buildings, Ali crept silently up to the wall of his father's office.

'Thank Allah the merciful the window is open.'

Putting his hand through it, he felt under the frame for the comfort of the rifle barrel. It was exactly where he remembered it and getting hold of the end, he levered it out of the window.

Ducking into the deep shadow of the wall, Ali pulled down the under lever which opened the breech and saw the gleam of a bullet lying in the chamber.

Though accurate the rifle was single shot and had to be reloaded each time it was fired. I need more bullets, he thought. But as he prepared to climb in and get them from the drawer in his father's desk, he heard the unmistakable squeak of a rubber boot on the stone floor outside the study. Ali jumped back from the window as the door burst open.

Three soldiers stormed into the room, guns in their shoulders, eyes on their sights.

Ali crept stealthily into the orchard, listening acutely for any sign they had seen him. Then hearing the muffled crash of breaking furniture drifting up from his father's office, he ran up the hill feeling suddenly sad and very alone.

In his plight he ran straight over the edge of the ditch and tumbled down the steep bank, landing with a splash in the pool of muddy water at the bottom.

It hurt, but he hadn't let go of the gun.

Terrified the noise would have alerted the soldiers, Ali struggled his way out and clambered down the old stream's course, heading to where a large olive tree grew.

I will have a clear view of the house from there, he thought, breaking into a trot.

Half-way there a shot rang out; the desperate shrieks of Hassan came ringing up to him.

They ceased abruptly. Cut off mid-scream.

Hot tears sprang into his eyes, blinding him, making him stumble over the smooth river stones as he negotiated his way toward the tree, and when he finally arrived at the base of the gnarled trunk Ali threw his arms around it, embracing it like a long-lost friend before breaking into anguished sobbing.

The old olive tree had stood there for six generations of his family and had been struck by lightning when only half-grown. The bolt had killed a section of the tree near the top and the seasonal rains had rotted out a hollow, in which Ali and Kamsen often hid from Hassan in happier days of hide-and-seek.

He gazed up at the familiar tree silhouetted against the crescent moon, shook himself to will away his tears and then slung the rifle over his back and started to climb. The familiar hand-holds came straight to him as he pulled himself into their old hiding place, and only when he was completely hidden, did he dare to look through a small gap in the branches; toward the farm buildings seventy yards away.

The scene that confronted him exceeded his worst fears. So terrible it was that for several moments he could not believe it was real. The latticework of twigs and leaves seemed to frame a postcard that had come straight from the pits of hell.

Sent, signed and stamped, by the Devil himself.

The old farmhouse was ablaze, tall red-yellow flames crackling evilly as they snaked into the night sky, to leave the farm bathed in an orangey glow.

Ali weaved his head around, searching for sight of his mother, to find her lying in a pool of blood, leaking from a cavity which had once been her tender, loving face.

He choked on the horror then pulled the rifle off his back to look through the scope. It placed him ten yards away.

Hassan was nowhere to be seen. A line of men were standing in front of the white picket fence that ran around his mother's vegetable garden.

Where the queue ended, Ali's life-long nightmare began.

Bent over the fence, tied at wrist and ankle to the bottom rail, was his little sister Kamsen.

The man behind her had his fatigues around his ankles. He was rutting into her ferociously as the waiting soldiers passed a bottle and told him to hurry up.

After grunting himself to a finish the soldier was pulled out of the way by the next one in line. Ali focused on the crosshairs, aiming at him and then he noticed his sister's face in the bottom of the lens.

She was looking straight at him, straight at their old hiding place, and she was crying.

No, she wasn't crying, she was repeating something... The same thing over and over. As he read her silent lips, a violent shudder ran through him. 'Kill me, Ali. Kill me, Ali.' Taking slow breaths to steady his panic, he looked through the scope again.

There was no mistaking it. His sister was looking straight at their old hiding place.

And those were her words.

He looked down for a moment, thought about it then decided he couldn't do it. Instead, he chose to shoot the soldier walking toward her.

Taking out his enormous, engorged penis, the soldier swiveled around to show it off to the others.

Some of the soldiers burst into laughter, while others stood rooted to the spot, round-eyed in their disbelief.

It was large enough Ali thought, to present him with a decent target and resting the barrel on a solid limb of the tree, he tweaked the crosshairs onto the man's chest.

The soldier grinned at his comrades and, satisfied he had their full attention, bent his knees slightly then with a shout of triumph he lunged forward, pile-driving himself deep into her.

Kamsen let out a bloodcurdling scream as it tore into her – her single shriek bouncing off the hillside to echo all the way down the valley in a series of diminishing cries.

The sound of her torture ripped through Ali. Each repeated shriek a white-hot poker thrust into his chest, searing his heart, vaporizing his soul, making him whimper out-loud in acute physical pain.

Kamsen's beautiful amber eyes were pleading with his own, when the recoil hit him.

FEMININA

Oxford

That Friday marked the successful conclusion of Victor's new series of lectures, 'We, the People' a term he had borrowed from the opening lines of the American Constitution. Many of his students were not surprised. They knew Victor considered the document to be one of the clearest statements of human freedom ever penned.

The lectures created a storm of interest across a wide spectrum of students, and several of the professors had had their curiosity piqued by a carefully crafted rumor which Leah slipped into the gossip-sphere that the talks were seditious - and that it was likely Victor would be suspended for speaking out, as they were a direct attack on British governance.

To ensure the hall was packed to the rafters, she told three carefully selected friends that she had edited the professor's lecture notes, and they must keep the subject matter secret. This worked so effectively, that on the second day the fire warden had ordered Victor to re-locate to the fifteen-hundred seat theater, but they still had a problem closing the doors on the clamoring throng trying to force its way inside.

To celebrate his success Victor and Leah decided on a private supper between themselves. The professor opened a bottle of Champagne and Leah proposed the toast.

'To a brave new world,' they said, both downing their glasses in salute.

Victor refilled them from the bottle in his hand. 'I understand how the second lecture drew such a crowd. But not why the first one did,' he said, cracking a crystalline blue eye at Leah.

'Then you have much in common with George Orwell's *Winston Smith*. You understand the 'how', just not the 'why'.'

'I see. Now I know the 'who', the 'why' becomes clear. But the 'how' still eludes.'

'Well Victor, I can't be certain, but there was a vicious rumor circulating that the lectures would propose a better system of government - constituting a direct attack on the present set up. A lot of people thought you would get defrocked.'

Convulsing into peals of laughter, Victor started shaking so uncontrollably that he spilt Champagne on the table. After several moments he calmed down, saying, 'Machiavelli would have envied you, Leah,' then his expression became thoughtful and he looked at her squarely. 'I hope you don't mind but I have a favor to ask. A boon to beg of thee.'

'Ask away, Victor. I never tire of watching a grown man beg,' Leah smiled, the Pol Roger '62 emboldening her risqué comment.

Victor replenished his glass. 'With the exception of my son, all my relatives died some time ago. And he is richer than Croesus, so it won't interest him. Anyhow, what it all boils down to is this; I am not without some money, and wondered if you would become an executor of my estate?'

This was wholly unexpected, and Leah was uncertain how to respond, but after a moments thoughts replied, 'I would be delighted,' before adding, 'Not in the near future, I hope?' with a flare of concern.

'At some point. Of that you can be certain.'

'I can't imagine a world without you. Who are the other executors?'

'It would be just yourself and my lawyer. I know that it's a lot of extra work and that nobody wants to do any real graft these days, so I have offered him fifty thousand pounds for his time and effort. I am prepared to make the same offer to you. And in case you are wondering about any catch 22s, I should mention that if you do not administer my estate in exact accordance with the instructions in my Will, you

only get ten thousand. But if you do, I have also arranged for the tax to be paid, so you will receive the fifty thousand pounds free and clear.'

'That's an incredibly generous offer, but I would do it anyway. Fifty thousand pounds? Are these instructions illegal? Or perverse in some way?'

'Ha! Sorry to disappoint, but no. The only one you may have a little difficulty with is this. I want all my notes and books destroyed. All of them – every one. If you have any other concerns, why not read the Will then give me your answer? Let me fetch it from the shelf on which it resides so you can go through it.'

'You want me to burn your library?'

'I do.'

'Why?'

'Because contained therein is the knowledge of how to control mankind. And I don't want mankind controlled. I prefer anarchy to tyranny, as I'm sure any reasonable person does. Before you say anything else, my lawyer has already agreed to my wish.'

'I see. Well, I would be delighted.'

'Delighted with the money, rather than the chance to burn my books,' he chuckled, climbing down the library ladder with a wad of papers.

He passed them across to her. 'Here, have a read while I prepare supper.'

Leah carried the papers over to his writing desk as Victor disappeared into the small kitchen in the back.

'How are you cooking the scallops?' she asked.

'Coquilles Mornay, à la Victor.'

Half an hour later he called out in French, 'How are you getting on?'

'J'ai fini,' she replied, walking over to the dining table.

'Good good. Then allow me to serve you the finest scallops you will eat north of Normandy – served 'Chez Victor',' he shamelessly plagiarized the London eatery in Soho, as he placed a large blue and gold Coalport china plate in front of her.

Four white scallops with a crisped breadcrumb top sizzled and hissed through mini volcanoes of erupting Swiss cheese sauce, scenting the room with the heady aroma of white wine, tarragon and Tabasco; the salty, sweet tang of the sea wafting succulently in the background.

'Victor, that smells divine.'

'Perhaps we should give them a moment to cool,' he suggested, knowing anticipation was part of the pleasure for them both.

He sipped the Pouilly Fuissé he had opened to accompany the scallops, and poured Leah a glass and then asked in faultless Parisian French, 'So! What is your answer?'

'I am honored by your offer, and will respect all of your wishes. Also, let me express my sincere gratitude for the money - thank you - you are a generous man.' Leah leaned across the table to kiss him on the cheek.

'Thank you, my dear. Thank you. I can't tell you how delighted I am, that you've accepted. Now, as I always 'turn the other cheek', let me seal our bargain with this.'

He took a velvet jewelry box out of his pocket. Holding it up with a flourish he placed it gently on the table in front of her.

It was Prussian blue and worn with age. A gold motif on top of the box outlined a pair of balancing

scales which had a lion-headed horse in one, a globe of the world in the other. It was exquisitely crafted; the lion-horse flowing with motion while the globe appeared to turn, whenever she looked away from it slightly. Overall the quality of workmanship imbued it with a classical, yet ancient, mystique.

With her expectation mounting to delight, Leah reached out to pick it up, she slowly opened it. Inside was a magnificent ring, sandwiched between soft satin folds that had yellowed with age.

The ring was formed from intricately woven gold, out of which exquisitely crafted hands gripped a large diamond surrounded by rubies and sapphires set in half-moon shapes.

Mesmerized by its stunning beauty, she took it out and turned it in the rays of the setting sun, to see an inscription carved into the solid gold beneath the stones. They looked a little like Egyptian hieroglyphs, but her closer inspection revealed they were not quite the same.

Unable to translate them she looked at Victor expectantly.

'It's Ancient Assyrian, so the writing is cuneiform,' he volunteered. 'They were the oldest civilization that could write.'

'How old is it?'

'The inscription dates from around 1500 BC. But no-one will tell me its exact age. They just say it's 'extremely old'.'

'It has a timeless beauty,' Leah smiled, slipping it onto the middle finger of her right hand. It fit her perfectly and she gazed into the depth of the stones.

The late evening sunlight seemed to pass between each semi-circle, changing color slightly before prizing into the next, so she was surprised to see only a single dot of white light reflecting on the bookcase in front of her - a fierce bright-white center, circled by the colors of the rainbow.

'It's the most stunning present, Victor. Thank you! I shall wear it always and every time I see it I will be reminded of this moment. I would love to know what the inscription means. Do you have any idea?'

'It's hard to be certain because the Sumerians used the same icons for several different things. In my view, it's the combination of those two icons which date it. Either that, or they were carved on later - which is unlikely as we've only been able to translate that particular cuneiform for the last hundred years. The wear on the inscription is obviously older. A forger could have gone to a great deal of trouble, only to have inscribed 'I drink camel urine' on it, for all he was aware.' He watched Leah's face.

'What I mean to say is this,' he went on as Leah rolled her eyes playfully, 'Only someone who knew what the inscription meant would bother to engrave those icons. It's their translation that leads me to think the ring must date from a time when that writing could be understood. And that combination of icons was used prolifically at around 1500 BC.'

Leah knew he was deliberately lengthening the process in order to heighten the moment, so ruefully, she locked eyes on him. 'Perhaps learning ancient Sumerian would save me a lot of time getting them translated.'

'That's what I felt too,' he smiled.

'In that case, I'll probably find some excellent reference material in those books behind you - if I dig deep enough and long enough.'

'Anything but that, I implore you. Allow me to remove the vandal of your curiosity by telling you plainly and simply. It means '*One of the Chosen Few*'.'

He smiled broadly at the frozen look on her face as he picked up his knife and fork.

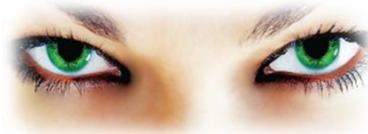
END OF SAMPLE

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