



# THE DEVIL'S LIGHT

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*Private Screening*

*Escape the Night*

*The Outside Man*

*The Lasko Tangent*

# THE DEVIL'S LIGHT

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RICHARD NORTH PATTERSON

Quercus

Quercus  
21 Bloomsbury Square  
London  
WC1A 2NS

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# PROLOGUE

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At ten o'clock on a night in late summer, a private aircraft ends a vertiginous upward climb by releasing a nuclear bomb over the city.

Seconds later, a missile turns the invader into an orange fireball against the night sky. As the bomb detonates in midair, a brilliant yellow light obliterates the darkness like a sheet of sun. After a last instant of silence there is a terrible explosion.

At the epicenter of the blast, the temperature is one million degrees Fahrenheit. Men and women on the sidewalks or in cars become ash; homes and apartments collapse into dust indistinguishable from their occupants; a massive wave sweeps the ocean, swamping boats and drowning anyone in them. For miles from its center the city is a radioactive scar without features. Farther out there are the photographic prints of buildings that no longer exist, imposed like shadows on the husks of ruined structures and charred bodies by the stunning light of the blast.

At its edge, walls of fire rise from nothing. On the highways ringing the city, cars collide, the eyeballs of their drivers and passengers turned to fluid. Others, also blinded, are buried in collapsing concrete or eviscerated by spears of falling glass. Birds ignite in midflight; a thick cloud of dust obscures the moon; airborne poisons fall like black rain; skin slides off the bodies of victims crying out in torment. The city itself is silent, the only movement ashes stirring in a nuclear wind. Two hundred thousand people no longer exist.

The slow death of a nation has begun.

\* \* \*

## Pakistan, 2009

Osama Bin Laden listened in silence, his long legs folded in front of him, his vitality drained, his liquid eyes still in a face so sallow it seemed to match his whitening beard. When the narrator had finished, he said, "All this with a single bomb."

Sitting at the edge of the carpet, Ayman Al Zawahiri looked from Bin Laden to the narrator, his eyes darting and suspicious behind steel-framed glasses. With a voice thickened by emotion, Amer Al Zaroor replied, "I believe so, yes. If we use it well."

They had risked much to be together; though their leader had powerful protectors within Pakistan, the compound in which he hid might well be closely watched. Dressed in robes and turbans, the three men were alone and, for a moment, wordless. To Al Zaroor it felt as though Bin Laden's deep contemplation had rendered the others mute—the strange power, he supposed, of a man who faces death by holding fiercely to his vision. At last Bin Laden said, "A seductive dream, Amer. In which everything depends on our choice of targets."

Amer Al Zaroor nodded. "I understand this, Renewer."

"Do you?" Zawahiri cut in harshly. "Then surely you have weighed the consequences if such a dream becomes reality. You ask us to risk all."

Al Zaroor faced him, aware of the magnetism that his lean, handsome face and reasoned manner

exerted on others—even Osama Bin Laden. “Our situation is bleak,” he said. “We are inferior to the crusaders and Jews in knowledge, technology, resources, finance, and military training. Across the Muslim world we are betrayed by corrupt Saudi princes who have sold their souls to the Americans, the lackeys of the West in Egypt and Jordan, the infidels and compromisers in Pakistan, the apostates in Iran who posture as revolutionaries while siphoning their people’s wealth.” He turned to Bin Laden and his words pulsed with quiet urgency. “There is one way for Muslims to defeat our enemies. A single blow so cataclysmic that it changes the world in an instant.”

An odd light appeared in Zawahiri’s face. “*Inshallah*,” he said. God willing.

Ignoring this, Bin Laden, the poet, remained true to a character that Al Zaroor revered—reflective almost gentle, with a keen intelligence that required no bluster outside pronouncements crafted for the West. “Still, Ayman’s caution is appropriate. After our triumph in 2001, the Americans nearly destroyed us in Afghanistan—only the stupidity of their adventure in Iraq revitalized our cause. Should your plan succeed, the fury of the West would be incalculable.”

Al Zaroor looked at their surroundings, his gaze meant to summon meaning from the shadows in which his leader was forced to live. “We are dying,” he said bluntly. “You may be dead tomorrow. Our operatives’ slaughter of Muslims in Iraq stained us in the hearts of many. No longer are you more popular in Saudi Arabia than its king. No longer does your face appear on the T-shirts of the young, or your name grace Muslim newborns. Now the American president means to bind Zionists to Arabs with the palliative of an unfair peace. We are patient men, Renewer, but the years since 2001 have yet to prove our friend.

“What is required now is the ultimate act of asymmetric warfare. We would not be the first—in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Americans unleashed the devil’s light on men and women and children. How can we do less without becoming cowards?”

Taken aback by their acolyte’s directness, Al Zawahiri became as still as a figure in a frieze. Sitting straighter, Bin Laden rearranged his robes, then said calmly, “If time is not our friend, when do you propose to act?”

Al Zaroor repressed his elation. “It will take years, not months, and great adaptability. But I will aim for the one date so symbolic that it will magnify our feat: September 11, the anniversary of our greatest triumph. To commemorate this at will would fill the world with awe, our enemies with dread.”

Hastily, Zawahiri sought to break the spell he imagined that Al Zaroor was casting. “To acquire such a bomb is a task of great complexity, involving the help of many others. How can you guarantee operational security?”

Instead of answering, Al Zaroor met the deputy’s eyes. Both men knew what neither would ever say: that, having conspired with others three decades before to assassinate Anwar Sadat, Zawahiri had betrayed them under torture. At last, Al Zaroor said, “You will have it, Ayman. If necessary, I will do it to make this so.”

Interceding, Bin Laden held up his hand, a gesture that combined blessing with admonition. “To do this would be momentous. The power of final approval must be mine alone.”

I pray you live to grant it, Al Zaroor thought. He bowed his head, signaling obeisance.

For a long moment, Bin Laden studied him. “God selects few men, Amer, to change the face of history. Perhaps you will be one.”

Briefly, Al Zaroor glanced at Zawahiri. With the faintest trace of irony, he replied, “*Inshallah*.”



# PART ONE

## THE ATTACK

The Blue Ridge Mountains—India—Pakistan  
August 2011



Two years after his near-murder in Beirut, Brooke Chandler visited his mentor, Carter Grey, to contemplate his future as a spy.

Headed for Grey's redoubt in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Brooke drove his Ferrari through the rolling Virginia countryside. The air of midafternoon felt hot and close. Timed as an escape from Washington in the steam bath of August, the trip was also a chance to see the couple who, given Brooke's routine deception of everyone he encountered, offered him the respite of intimacy and ease. The Greys had become his shadow family.

North of Charlottesville, Brooke turned off one country road onto another that narrowed to a dirt track winding through wooded foothills, ever higher, until he reached the Greys' retreat at the top of a ridge three thousand feet above sea level. A large wooden structure, it was the work of Grey's hands, built before the wreckage of his body prohibited hard labor. Now it was home. Jutting from the site, its rear deck commanded a view of forested ridgelines receding in the distance, becoming shadows in a thin low fog that glimmered with reflected sunlight. This was, Grey had explained to Brooke, the fulfillment of a lifelong plan—to drink cocktails in his dotage while admiring a perfect view.

But the home was also the summation of a life. Perfectly maintained, it housed an astonishing collection of pristine guns from wars fought by nine generations of Americans—many forgotten, misconceived, or misunderstood—and carefully chosen rugs, art, and furniture from Grey's assignments overseas. Outside were satellite dishes for the television, computer, and communication equipment through which Grey kept in touch with a world where, usually in secret, he had once maintained the power to change events.

Those times, Grey had remarked to Brooke, were defined by the Cold War and the rise of the American empire, breeding a sense of mission that, while sometimes illusory, had made the work less soul-wearing. Grey was from the Kennedy generation: gentlemen spies whose mandate had been to shape history and who, in the end, were shaped by it. In succession, he had operated in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, served as station chief in Germany at the height of the Cold War, and helped precipitate the collapse of the Soviet empire by equipping a half million Afghans to fight the Red Army—while, he added ruefully, helping train the militia who formed the Taliban. Along the way he became the most decorated agent in the history of the CIA, honored as one of the fifty most important figures when the agency marked its first fifty years. But he had spent the last two decades as an administrator in Washington, barred by age and injury from fieldwork, until the toxic politics of the city had merged with debilitating pain to drive him to retirement. Now he was here.

Brooke got out of his car, savoring the crisp, cool air. At once the front door opened and Grey stepped stiffly onto the front porch. He appraised Brooke, then his expensive ride. "Still driving that toy, I see."

"The agency promised me a life of adventure," Brooke responded. "Now I'm reduced to dodging radar guns."

Grey grunted, a mixture of dismissal and comprehension. Then he hobbled down the front steps, fighting the weakness in his spine to hold himself erect. His head of steel-gray hair was still full, and Grey remained handsome in a way made craggy by age and adversity—if America was replicating the fall of Rome, he had once remarked to Brooke, then he was Roman ruins. What remained young were

his clear light-blue eyes and the vigor with which, as always, he embraced Brooke Chandler like a son.

They might have passed for that, Brooke knew. Once, in a moment of remembrance as Grey slept, his wife, Anne, had told Brooke that he evoked her husband before the nightmare of Iran. Brooke had seen the photographs; Carter had combined the can-do alertness of a soldier with the strong, clean features of the all-American boy. Brooke had the same blond hair, a chiseled face that suggested his heritage, and the smile of a generation raised on fluoride and orthodontia. Brooke tried to wear his handsomeness lightly; he knew that he had been born lucky. Until a decade ago, the year before he joined the agency, he had endured no real hardship or disappointment. Despite the years since, he still looked it.

The two men smiled at each other. "I'd say that you seem good," Brooke said, "except that you'd remind me I'm a practiced liar. So how are you really?"

"Good in the morning," Grey said matter-of-factly, "medicated by two. Given that it's four o'clock and I just got up from my nap, I'm trying to remember who you are."

"Don't worry, Carter. Anne will remind you."

Grey laughed without humor. "Marrying me really was the devil's pact. Twenty good years, and now she's practicing medicine and running a retirement home."

"She'd still make that deal," Brooke answered. "At your worst, you're never dull."

As if on cue, Anne Grey appeared in the doorway. Slight, blond, and quick of movement, Anne at sixty still reminded Brooke of a hummingbird ready to take flight. Grey had met her at the agency; as with other such couples, the secret existence they led distanced them from others, but provided a depth of understanding no outsider could grasp. For years in the field Anne had weathered this life as a partner. Now, moored to Grey by history and devotion, she had taken on living in the mountains as though it were another posting. The balm for Grey's regrets was their harmonious marriage, one Brooke had increasing trouble imagining for himself.

Skittering down the steps, Anne kissed him. "It's so good to see you, Brooke. For both of us."

"You, too. If your face weren't so mobile, I'd guess you were mainlining Botox."

She briefly smiled at Grey, including him in the badinage. "It's the air up here. The life suits us." Taking her husband's arm, she shepherded him back up the steps. "We keep expecting you to bring a woman for us to meet."

Brooke glanced at her, miming disbelief. "So you can watch me lie to her?"

Anne shot him a look of mock impatience. "Marry one of them and none of us would have to lie."

"It's harder than you think," Brooke replied. "I suspect Carter married the only woman who'd have him."

Now her expression mimed the solemnity of thought. "True. I was young and foolish then, easily distracted by sex and talk of foreign travel."

Grey conjured up a scowl of displeasure. "You got here just in time," he informed Brooke. "But it's too early for a drink, and I'm still too full of morphine. Let's attempt a walk and I'll describe the other women in my life."

"I already know about the one with the navel ring," Anne replied. Kissing her husband, she added lightly, "Don't wear Brooke out."

Brooke heard her silent message: *Don't let him fall.*

"I won't stand for it," he assured her.

Their rear garden, Anne's work, bloomed with flowers and tomatoes. Grey prodded Brooke toward a walking trail beneath the shade along the ridgeline. He moved with determination, but the odd step

was halting, marking back injuries and internal damage dating back to the fall of the shah over thirty years before. Risking his life, Grey had shed his cover as a diplomat to give an endangered Iranian agent—a member of the shah’s intelligence service—money and false documents to facilitate his escape. On the way back, he encountered two members of the Revolutionary Guard, their loathing of Americans fueled by fanaticism and hatred of the shah’s secret police. Mistaking the American “diplomat” for what he was—a spy—the two men decided to stomp him to death. They were well on their way when Grey located the gun in his suit coat. He killed them in an instant.

Spitting up blood, Grey crawled to his car, drove to a safe house, and slept for two days. Then he returned to the embassy, refusing to report his injury for fear of being ordered to abandon his post. When he finally endured the first of a series of operations that kept him alive, the surgeon who viewed his shattered organs and broken ribs and spine had told Anne, “This is worse than the worst car wreck I’ve ever seen, and those patients died.”

Grey lived on, but as a different man. Years later, he could still describe to Brooke the glittering zeal in his assailants’ eyes. “That was when I realized,” he concluded, “that America as a nation had no clue about what the hell this was about. Most Americans still don’t.”

Now they paused, standing on Grey’s latest point of pride, a new bridge that crossed a rivulet still swollen with late-spring rains. Leaning on the railing, they watched the ridgelines as they softened in the light of early evening, two men at peace. At length, Grey asked, “So how *is* the Outfit now? For you, I mean.”

“You know how it is,” Brooke said flatly. “Maybe getting burned in Beirut wasn’t a career killer. But being chained to a desk job makes me feel like the living dead. I still perceive everything around me, but can no longer speak or move.”

His mentor glanced at him sideways. “They’re keeping you safe. Though perhaps in the minds of some, you’re serving a stretch in purgatory for the sin of being right.”

Brooke shrugged. “Better than getting killed, I’m sure. What a joke of a death *that* would have been, taken out by a couple of amateurs from al Qaeda because my idiot station chief couldn’t tell a double agent from his own unfaithful wife.”

Grey laughed softly. “You don’t get out of life alive. You were hoping to die for a reason?”

“Everyone dies for a reason. I was hoping for a better one.”

“At least you helped the Lebanese break up an al Qaeda cell.”

“I could have done more,” Brooke objected. “When Lorber butted in, there was still work to do.”

Grey gazed out at the ridges and valleys. “Dangerous work. Thanks to Lorber’s blunder, you’re more likely to die in bed at the age of ninety-five. The question becomes how you kill the time between now and then.”

“Not this way. Serving as a bureaucrat erodes my sense of purpose. I’ve taken to reading analysts’ reports on al Qaeda just to sate my curiosity.”

“Which is a good thing,” Grey opined. “You need curiosity, and you need to care about the work. Have you thought about becoming an analyst?”

Brooke shook his head. “I’m a field officer by nature. As long as I’m with the agency I want to serve where it matters. I’ve been stuck here too long.”

“Granted.” Grey eyed him more closely. “But I heard another element just now—’as long as I’m with the agency.’”

Brooke fell quiet for a time. “I’ve started questioning my life,” he acknowledged. “I’ve always accepted that foreign postings made relationships harder. So does deception. Not that I minded lying

to foreigners—that’s what we’re supposed to do. But now I’m telling Mickey Mouse lies to neighbors, the women I meet, and friends who’ve spent years believing they still know me. Even my parents think I’ve got some desk job at the State Department.”

“You’re allowed to tell your parents, Brooke.”

“And horrify my mother? She’d probably leak my identity to the *New York Times*.” Brooke paused then added with resignation, “Feeling distant from my parents is nothing new. But sometimes I visit my friends from graduate school—with sharp wives, and little kids they like—and I want a family of my own.”

“Anne told me you were seeing someone. A lawyer, wasn’t it?”

“We’ve broken up. Erin was no fool—she’d started calling me ‘elusive.’ I had to decide whether we were worth breaking cover for, and concluded we weren’t.” Brooke smiled a little. “Besides, it takes a special woman to help you live a lie. Which is why, in my expert opinion, Bernie Madoff never told his wife he was a crook.”

“Maybe Madoff just liked lying,” Grey parried. “I grant you I was lucky in Anne. The life imposed a certain solitude. Further complicated, in field officers, by the rules against romantic entanglements with foreign nationals.”

Brooke raised his eyebrows. “I got entangled once or twice in Lebanon—it deepened my cover. But that’s all it was.”

“You’re lucky to have gotten by with it,” Grey said dryly. “I remember the case of one of our analysts, a Hindu, who started sleeping with his mother and sister…”

“Not at the same time, I hope.”

“No. When confronted, our man said his transgressions were a matter of caste—he couldn’t find a wife of his station in the entire D.C. area. Nonetheless, we fired him. Not for incest, mind you, but for sleeping with foreign nationals. We have our standards, after all.”

Brooke could not help but laugh. “Thank God for that.”

“Which reminds me,” Carter continued, “wasn’t there an Israeli woman left over from your former life? You once were quite attached to her, I thought.”

“That was years ago. It’s been five years since I told her my last lie.”

Something in Brooke’s tone of voice caused Grey to appraise him. “What happened to her?”

“No idea. After the war between Israel and Hezbollah, she simply vanished. No email, no phone, nothing. For all I know she’s dead.”

Studying Brooke’s face, Grey asked nothing more. “About your career,” he said at length, “it’s time for a think. And a drink.” He hesitated, as though reluctant to ask a favor. “Mind helping me get back up the hill?”

Regarding his mentor with fond concern, Brooke resolved to stop complaining. “Anything for a single malt scotch,” he said. But he knew Grey had more to say. His mentor had invested too much in Brooke’s career, and in Brooke himself, to remain silent about his future.

Restless, Amer Al Zaroor paced a safe house in Peshawar, waiting in the night for a Pakistani general.

The city was a gateway to Afghanistan, a crowded maze where a man could disappear. Outside the building, a tangled web of electrical wires hung over a dusty street. When morning came, motorized rickshaws and brightly painted buses would belch exhaust into air so polluted that it seared the throat. The apartment where Al Zaroor concealed himself was dingy and featureless, with a flea-infested carpet that stank of dog urine, and one small window over which he had drawn a blind. It was not the sense of confinement that chafed his nerves; as a soldier of al Qaeda he had endured far worse, sustained by a vision of the future. But now he was relying on a man he hardly knew, who might have as many loyalties as his failing country had factions, and whose shifting interests might cause him to deliver Al Zaroor to traitors allied with America and the Jews, Pakistanis with even fewer scruples than their masters. His consolation was that this stranger's intermediary was a trusted leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba—the fearsome Pakistani jihadists—who had proved his mettle by planning the devastating attack on Mumbai less than three years before.

Like Al Zaroor, *this* man—Ahmed Khan—had been waging jihad since America had armed Muslim militia against the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan. The most zealous fighters of that war became a fraternity. Thus, like Al Zaroor, Khan had extensive contacts among al Qaeda, the Taliban, LET, and the Pakistani military intelligence agency—the ISI—which had been among each group's earliest patrons. LET and the Pakistani army recruited heavily in the Punjab region; Khan and the general were cousins. Such was Pakistan.

Al Zaroor's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. When he answered, a man's voice said, "We're about to serve the curry."

A message from Khan.

The line went dead. Heart racing, Al Zaroor switched on CNN.

Nothing yet. The fare remained innocuous, a documentary on micro-financing in India. Watching and waiting, Al Zaroor thought about his first meeting with General Ayub.

They had faced each other one year ago, in this same dreary room.

Dressed in a tailored suit, General Ayub was slender, bespectacled, and wholly unprepossessing. He did not remind Al Zaroor of a warrior.

Ayub sat across from him, fidgeting. For minutes the two men circled each other with words. Finally, Ayub said, "I'm told that you want a device. A special one."

Al Zaroor gave a barely perceptible nod. After a moment, Ayub leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped in the attitude of prayer. Softly, he said, "I control six."

Al Zaroor's alertness quickened. "Where are they?"

"In an underground vault beneath an air force base ringed by troops, sensors, and electrified wire. Like other such sites, it is secret. Few know that it exists, fewer know the precise nature of my responsibilities. Now you are one."

Al Zaroor's mouth felt dry. In a matter-of-fact tone he asked, "Tell me about the properties of this

device.”

The general took out a British cigarette, lighting it with care before inhaling deeply. To Al Zaroor who had no such vices, the man had the air of an abstemious smoker, trying to conceal from others that he lived for each carefully rationed cigarette. “It is two hundred pounds,” he said at length, “with dimensions suitable for a coffin. It is made to be delivered by plane. The intended target, as you must guess, is within India.”

“And its security features?”

“Until it is needed, the triggering package is kept separate from the core. Even when assembled, there is an electronic code that must be activated before the device can detonate. Access to the code is confined to a few scientists and the technician who will accompany the device in flight.” A note of entreaty crept into Ayub’s voice. “As you can see, the barriers to unauthorized usage are considerable. It might well be easier to buy or steal highly enriched uranium and construct a device of your own.”

“I don’t want a technological problem,” Al Zaroor said curtly. “The Japanese group Aum Shan tried such a project with millions of dollars and a team of scientists. They failed. I prefer to buy off the shelf.”

“Then you would need the code,” Ayub parried. “Not even I possess it.”

“For now, let’s set that aside. How might an interested party acquire such a device?”

The general grimaced. “The most obvious way is to attack a base like mine. But that involves piercing an electrical fence manned by guards, and a second such fence around the vault itself. In between are several hundred soldiers.” Ayub drew a breath, as if the thought itself made him weary. “You would need at least six hundred fighters willing to die in pitched battle. That would also create commotion visible to the American spy satellites. The odds against you are great.”

Al Zaroor stared at Ayub. Coolly, he said, “There are other ways, General.”

Faced with this tacit reproof, the general spread his arms, trailing ashes and smoke from his burning cigarette. “There could be a mutiny, of course, where a commanding officer takes over a facility. But on what basis does he enlist his troops? Any man who risked this and failed would face execution.”

“I would hate to ask such a man to hazard his life,” Al Zaroor replied with an edge of irony. “Perhaps it would be best if he gave up the device in secret.”

The general’s body stiffened. Taking a last drag, he ground the cigarette on the wooden arm of his chair. “How would this man smuggle it out without the complicity of others? Sooner or later, an inventory would be taken, and his own death would follow.” His voice hardened. “I believe in jihad, but not as a martyr. I have no use for seventy virgins in this life or the next.”

Al Zaroor smiled faintly. “You take us for primitives, General. Surely there are circumstances where the device is taken from its womb.”

Ayub shook his head. “Only during a state of nuclear alert between India and Pakistan. Such accidents of fate are out of my control.”

“Nonetheless, what would happen to your devices should Pakistan decide that it might use them?”

Ayub steepled his fingers. “They would be deployed for a possible second strike, from different airfields than the ones we assume the Indian air force would level. In the event of a first strike against India, our bombers would return to the new field. The devices would already await them.”

“How do the devices travel there?”

“By secret convoy. Quite probably at night.”

“And the location of these airfields?”

“Almost all are in the Punjab, close to India.”

Al Zaroor nodded, eyes narrowing in thought. “Before moving the device, do you unite its components?”

“Yes.”

“Then that reduces the technical problems, doesn’t it. All that remains is to unlock the electronic codes.”

Al Zaroor’s calm caused a look of irritation to cross the general’s face, closely pursued by worry. “You make this sound like a training exercise. The convoy would be heavily guarded.”

“Still, General, if one knew where and when the bomb was moving, you wouldn’t need six hundred suicidal jihadists to acquire it. A more modest plan might do.”

Ayub scowled. “Then you’re back to the element you conveniently dismissed—our security code, the so-called permissive action links that prevent accidental detonation.”

“PALs,” Al Zaroor said. “I’ve read of them—a clever American invention, designed to keep their own devices in transit from destroying Cincinnati. If the sequences of numbers entered to arm the weapon prove incorrect after several tries, the PAL system disables itself, rendering the device useless. Rather like an ATM.”

“Precisely.”

“But isn’t it also true,” Al Zaroor prodded quietly, “that Pakistan refused to adopt a PAL system provided by America for fear that the Americans would disable its devices? The Pakistani system, in my limited understanding, is simpler. And, as you say, a trained technician from the air force can defeat it.”

“That is true, yes. Assuming that you find him.”

Al Zaroor kept watching his face. “But *you* could help us locate such a man, couldn’t you. Or at least suggest one.”

Ayub hesitated. “Perhaps,” he conceded in an arid tone. “Then all you’d need is someone to provoke a state of nuclear alert between India and Pakistan.”

Al Zaroor smiled again. “Please don’t trouble yourself with that. I’ve asked enough of you, my brother.”



After a dinner of steaks and fresh vegetables accompanied by a good Bordeaux, Brooke and Carter Grey sat on the deck, watching the stars above the purple shadows of the ridgeline. Brooke sipped Calvados; Grey, who now drank sparingly, settled for decaffeinated coffee.

“I don’t quarrel with anything you’ve told me,” Grey began. “The life exacts a price. And you got screwed in Beirut, cutting your work against al Qaeda short. Since then, Anne and I have sensed a certain weariness of the soul, the residue of some very hard years.” Grey paused, softening his tone. “I also know why you joined, and how personal that is to you. What happened ten years ago could repeat itself all too easily. In a few swift strokes, the trifecta of transnational terrorism, Islamic extremism, and the proliferation of WMD could change the world as we know it—not only our security, but our values. Not many Americans get that. You do.”

Brooke took a swallow of brandy. “Does it matter?” he said finally. “As a nation we’re addicted to wishful thinking, staggering from crisis to crisis with the foresight of a two-year-old. Think of all the people who nearly bought us a worldwide depression: financial parasites, greedy lenders, cowardly regulators, venal politicians, and millions of gullible folks who lived on charge cards and thought they could buy a house for nothing. Or a massive oil spill, where a soulless company was enabled by a spineless bureaucracy that gave them what they wanted, and a populace too blind to see that oil has become like crack. It’s a moral failure on the most profound level, where everyone blames everyone else, and no one looks in the mirror.

“Apply that to our work. Before 9/11 Bin Laden did everything but advertise. Yet he had to blow up the Twin Towers just to get the serious attention of anyone outside the intelligence community.” Brooke paused, then finished with weary resignation. “So what did we do? We invaded the wrong country, killed the wrong madman, and too often used the wrong interrogation techniques on the wrong people—all because our leaders lost contact with the truth.”

Grey nodded. “A classic illustration of what I call Cheney’s Law: Theorists sit in Washington jabbering about the world like the inmates of an asylum, until they create their own reality out of fantasy, never imagining the havoc they’ll wreak. As for the Democrats, a lot of them live in the wings, reserved for manic-depressives—on any given day, you don’t know who they’ll be. In either case, we become their whipping boy when things go wrong.”

“I’m sick of it,” Brooke said bluntly. “The Outfit’s job is to prevent the Apocalypse. But what have we learned as a society since Bin Laden took down the World Trade Center? Our political dialogue is even more empty and corrosive. As long as neocons like Cheney invoke terrorism and adopt an air of gravity, the right listens even when they’re babbling in tongues. Throw in the Tea Party folks, who think the president is ten times more dangerous than any external enemy. Then there are liberals like my mother and her rich friends, who have no more idea of what we’re facing than a gaggle of spoiled children.” Brooke’s voice quickened with the frustration he could seldom express. “On 9/11 we were badly wounded by men without a country. Bin Laden’s death won’t change that. These people want weapons of mass destruction; sooner or later, they’ll have some. And unlike the Soviets or Saddam or the Iranians, you can’t find them.”

“But that’s why you joined up,” Grey argued. “In five years, someone like you will be the station chief in a tough place like Beirut. You represent the new breed of talent we’ve recruited since 9/11.”

He paused for emphasis. “Even among them, you stand out. You’re an artist—imaginative, with a rare combination of operational and analytical skills. You can quote poetry in Arabic. You challenge conventional wisdom. Your guts and instincts kept al Qaeda from taking you out in Lebanon.” Wryly Grey concluded, “With a little extra seasoning, you’ll be the equal of any terrorist.”

“Or of any desk jockey in Washington.”

“That shouldn’t have happened,” Grey replied. “But now they’ve brought back Noah Brustein as deputy director. He’ll be quick to see you’re being wasted.”

“And when Brustein goes?” Brooke asked. “Our leadership has become a game of musical chairs where the occupants change at the whim of the political classes. Good or bad, they’re gone in two years. And with every change, more good people think about leaving.”

“Maybe so. But al Qaeda never quits, and now they’ll be looking to avenge Bin Laden.” Grey placed his hand on Brooke’s shoulder. “Give it time. There’s nothing more important than what we do, and nowhere else to do it—”

From inside they heard a soft cry. At first, Brooke thought Anne had fallen; fearing both for her and Grey, he rushed inside.

Pale, Anne looked up from her chair. Pointing at the television, she said, “Someone just hit the Taj Mahal.”

On CNN, the sacred site was rubble in which the marble domes had vanished, the graceful spires turned to stubs. Shocked, Brooke murmured, “Like Mumbai.”

He felt Grey behind him. In a low voice, he said, “Then India will blame Pakistan. Pray they keep their lid on it.”

Suddenly the image changed. In a tone he fought to keep professional, Anderson Cooper said swiftly, “Another plane has struck the Indian Parliament at the beginning of its morning session—”

The stately structure, Brooke recalled, also had a dome, this one ringed by ornate pillars. Now the dome was gone, and so must be many lives. Brooke had no more words. The thick black plume of smoke evoked a sickening memory of September 11—the day had transformed Brooke’s life, when he had begun to fear the next attack that could transform the country that had made him who he was.

In Peshawar, Al Zaroor watched the television, pulse racing, as the shell of the Taj Mahal crumbled into ruins. When the picture changed, the Indian Parliament was charred concrete surrounded by ambulances whose sirens sounded like squeals of agony. Then the screen caught the anguished features of a female parliamentarian, a Hindu who described the carnage with tears running down her face.

Each image was as Al Zaroor had envisioned. He could almost feel the hatred searing the souls of Indians. His plan had sprung to terrible life.

The summer before, he had met with Ahmed Khan in the tribal areas near the Khyber Pass, a stronghold of the Taliban. Though the jagged hills were cooler, a pleasant change, both men were tired and sore—each had made the last leg of the trip on horseback. But this did not dim their pleasure in meeting again. At first sight they had embraced, smiling, two veterans who had survived the wars of their youth.

Much had happened since. In the time since the Mumbai attacks, Khan's master achievement, Al Zaroor felt an admiration tinged by envy. But he knew that Khan would not be satisfied until Pakistan, not India, held dominance over the Muslims of Kashmir.

The two men sat together on a rock, gazing out at the expanse of valleys and mountains still capped with snow. Studying Khan, Al Zaroor saw a stringy man on whom God had wasted no fat, his look of alertness hardened by time into adamancy. For a while they spoke of old comrades and where their lives had brought them. Khan had more to say: Fortune had given him a family and a home in Karachi, his safety protected by the ISI and friends in the Pakistani military—a difference that both saddened and freed Al Zaroor. As a principle of operational security, he had nothing to lose but his life.

At length, their talk became philosophical. "After all the years and battles," Al Zaroor asked rhetorically, "what have you left to fear?"

"Softness." Khan spat the word. "Our government's, not mine. America's civilian puppets in Islamabad desire a truce with India. The terms will no doubt be shameful: India's retention of Kashmir, which by rights should be a land for Muslims. There will be pressure from the West to shut us down."

Al Zaroor eyed him keenly. "So you're waiting for this to happen?"

"No," Khan rejoined. "And you? Is the Renewer resting on his laurels, watching Iran and the Shia Hezbollah wage their tepid version of jihad?"

The corner of Al Zaroor's mouth flickered at the jibe. "You and I still have much in common, Ahmed. On behalf of Muslim Kashmir, you were at pains to kill Jews and Zionists in Mumbai. We want to banish the Zionist entity from Palestine. Yet matters remain as they were. That should shame us both."

Khan gave him a sideways look. "Bravely spoken."

"We're not done yet," Al Zaroor said flatly. "Nor, I assume, are you. But your patrons grow too circumspect. Perhaps you need an investor to help you strike again." Al Zaroor softened his tone.

“You want Pakistan to wrest Kashmir from India. The ‘normalization’ of relations between the two would utterly defeat your purpose. Despite your masterstroke in Mumbai, you did not succeed in estranging them. That calls for a shot to the heart of India.”

Khan appeared nettled. Sardonicly, he asked, “What greater act of boldness do you suggest for us?”

“To succeed where al Qaeda failed. On September 11, we dispatched two passenger planes to destroy the World Trade Center. Another damaged the Pentagon, the seat of America’s military power. But a fourth plane was meant to level the Capitol and slaughter the senators and congressmen inside. Only a few unruly passengers thwarted us from wreaking utter psychic devastation on America eclipsing two ruined towers filled with Jewish stockbrokers.” He paused, finishing quietly, “Imagine that the face of our attacks was Capitol Hill in ashes. Then ask yourself what the infidels of India hold closest to their hearts.”

Considering, Khan flicked his tongue across parched lips. “And you would help finance this?”

“We have the resources, certainly.”

“And your reasons?” Khan paused, then added slowly, “I recall introducing you to my cousin, the general.”

“Yes. Thank you for your courtesy.”

Khan stared at him. “An attack of the kind you suggest would have consequences. The she-males in our civilian government would recoil; even our friends in the ISI might disapprove. The risks are considerable.”

“As are the rewards.”

“Perhaps. But there is also the question of methods. Do you expect us to hijack passenger planes? The martyrs of September 11 made that much more challenging.”

Al Zaroor shrugged. “If this is a matter of airplanes, we can help you acquire your own.”

“And fill them with explosives?”

Al Zaroor smiled a little. “You can supply the explosives, along with the martyrs to fly them.” His tone became practical. “The Indian air force is very professional. But they have too much territory to cover, and too many sites to defend. In this they are like the Americans.”

Eyes narrowing, Khan stared at the mountains. At length, he said, “The Americans are pushing the eunuch who masquerades as our prime minister into further talks with India. The goal is to emasculate our country, forcing it to abandon Kashmir.” Khan faced Al Zaroor squarely. “I will use my sources to explore the risks of peace. Then I will meet with you again, if only as a courtesy. Whatever else I do will be in the interests of our brothers in Kashmir.”

In the soft glow of the television, Carter Grey lit a cigarette, his first since Brooke had arrived.

Briefly, Anne glanced at him, then resumed watching CNN. Amid the rubble of the Indian Parliament, soldiers and emergency responders searched for survivors or the dead, giant figures on an oversized flatscreen. The images revived the most searing hours of Brooke’s life.

“Lashkar-e-Taiba,” Grey said without turning. “This is an act of desperation.”

Anne glanced at the cigarette burning in his hand. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s all about Kashmir. Most Kashmiri are Muslim, but the province belongs to India. The ISI wants to change that: Within the government of Pakistan, the military intelligence service operates a shadow state of its own. The ISI helped create LET to fight a guerrilla war in Kashmir. A potential

détente between India and Pakistan would be a mortal threat to their ambitions. That's why LET attacked Mumbai."

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"Why didn't the Pakistanis shut them down?"

Stirring himself from the past, Brooke said to Anne, "The ISI won't permit it. After Mumbai, there were a few 'punitive' measures, all a charade. With the ISI's protection, LET continues to train hundreds of jihadists every year. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal gives LET a shield; if India invades Pakistan in reprisal for the actions of LET, it runs the risk of a nuclear attack." Turning to Grey, Brooke asked, "What odds would you quote me on reprisal now? Or nuclear war?"

Grey watched the picture shift to thousands of Indians in New Delhi, flooding the streets to express their grief and anger. "You know the history," he said wearily. "Before 9/11, LET hijacked an Air India flight to swap hostages for prisoners jailed by India, including an ally of Bin Laden's. A month after 9/11, they launched a failed assault on the Parliament they've now destroyed. That time, only the attackers died. But both countries mobilized for war. President Bush and Colin Powell had to use every ounce of influence to head off a nuclear nightmare."

Anne gently took the cigarette from his hand, grinding it out. "The Mumbai attack was far worse," she said. "Why didn't that cause another crisis?"

"Calculated restraint by India. But LET achieved its immediate goal—disrupting a rapprochement between India and Pakistan." Grey glanced back at the television. "Like this one, that attack involved intricate planning and operational sophistication. The fact that LET didn't claim credit allowed the ISI to protect its operations, using its cover as an Islamic charity. Now this."

In the semidarkness, Brooke forced himself to turn from the screen. "I assume this is LET's reaction to our pressure on Pakistan to focus on the Taliban."

"In part. Some senior officers in the Pakistani military resent that—as does the ISI, which provides the Taliban with clandestine support and allows it to move back and forth across the border to Afghanistan to kill American soldiers. But on a deeper level, this is about who controls Pakistan's nuclear arsenal—the civilian government or the army. Right now, the army does; the prime minister wants some say. My guess is that the army will use this opportunity to remind the civilians who decides when the arsenal gets deployed." As he studied the images of the dead and injured on the screen, both Indians and tourists, Grey's tone became somber. "After Mumbai, the Indians held back. But this time the bombs and missiles may be coming out of their hiding places. God help us if this tragedy goes nuclear."

Turning to the screen, Brooke watched an EMT carry a corpse from the wreckage of the Taj Mahal. Bowing his head, he summoned as much of a prayer as his tattered beliefs could muster.

In Peshawar, Al Zaroor pulled aside the blind, peering into the crowded street. When he saw the car, he closed the blind, pausing only to watch the riot beginning in Mumbai, the faces of Hindus suffused with hatred as they started hunting down Muslims. Then he switched off the television and left.

The operation had begun.

As dusk fell, Al Zaroor waited for the warrior so essential to his dream. Back against the thick trunk of a tree, he looked down from rolling hills at a two-lane road that ran through the verdant farmland of the Punjab. The air was hot and humid, very different from the place where he had first encountered Ismail Sharif a year before. But he still recalled the jolt of recognition: in the face of this stranger, Al Zaroor had seen his younger self.

They sat at an outdoor café in the village of Madyan, a Taliban stronghold in the Swat, sampling pastries and drinking thick black coffee. The café was set on a green hillside sloping to a narrow river whose rushing current carried its own echo. Moved by the beauty of their surroundings, so different from the flat horizons of his homeland, Al Zaroor allowed himself a moment of serenity. Then he turned to face Sharif.

Despite his beard, the man looked alarmingly young, with a lineless face and liquid eyes in which pride warred with a curious vulnerability. But by reputation, Sharif was a skilled tactician who had mastered the art of ambush and surprise, slaughtering government troops through swift assaults in carefully chosen terrain. According to Al Zaroor's sources, Sharif was barely more Taliban than al Qaeda, a man impatient with inaction and devoted to God. But Sharif's hatred of the army involved more than principle: Government soldiers had raped his sister and killed a younger brother by driving nails into his skull. The coolness with which he exacted his revenge was a tribute to self-discipline.

For a moment, Al Zaroor looked deeply into the young man's eyes. Then he said, "I bring greetings from Osama Bin Laden, our Renewer, and Ayman Al Zawahiri. As I do, they wish to know if you're unafraid to die."

Sharif's eyes hardened abruptly, casting his face in a new light. "I'm more prepared to kill," he answered coldly. "Were that not so, I would not have killed so many soldiers in this land."

"Are you prepared to kill them in the Punjab?"

Sharif hesitated, then shrugged. "For jihad, it does not matter where. Only who, and why."

Al Zaroor nodded. "The assignment comes from the Renewer himself, and is vital to our cause. It will also require great skill."

"What is it?"

"On short notice, I will ask you to marshal three trucks and fifty or so crack fighters. For safety's sake, you will bring them through Baluchistan, where the army does not go, to a site at the edge of the Punjab. There you will assault an armed convoy of Pakistani soldiers, leaving no survivors, and seize an important piece of property."

Sharif cocked his head. "Gold?"

"It is gold to Osama. That is all I can tell you, my brother."

The young man put a finger to his lips, regarding Al Zaroor with a chill curiosity. Al Zaroor admired his self-possession—Sharif had mastered the human need to fill silence with words. At length, he said, "Describe the site."

"It is a road at the bottom of foothills near Multan, with ditches on both sides. The countryside is

agricultural, the road lightly traveled. The convoy will come at night.”

“How many soldiers?”

“Also around fifty, the best the army has.”

Silent, Sharif turned, gazing pensively into the gorge below. Then he faced Al Zaroor again. “I will want photographs of the site, an air map of its surroundings. That will help define the operation. Likely I’ll need plastic explosives, claymore mines, and rocket-propelled grenades. That requires money.”

“You will have it.”

“I’ll also need to recruit men. My people prefer to fight in the Swat. Punjab is not their home.”

“It is, however, where they can strike a great blow against those who invade their lands. Those who value money over jihad will have more than they’ve ever imagined.”

Sharif studied him. “You’re ripe with promises, brother. To what end?”

Al Zaroor gave him a look of deep sincerity. “Only the Renewer and Zawahiri can know. This much I will say to you: Our aim is to wound our enemies on a scale beyond anything you’ve ever dreamed, or will be able to dream again. Not just the infidels in Pakistan, but the Zionists, the Americans, and the Shia. You will avenge your brother and sister a thousandfold. You might even live.”

“I plan to,” Sharif said calmly. “We outnumber the army in the Swat. But in the Punjab the soldiers are many, and move with greater confidence. If this prize is as important as you say, an attack will bring them swarming like bees.”

Al Zaroor sat back. He dipped his fingers in a bowl of water, removing the sticky residue of pastries. “Bring me a plan,” he said. “By the night we carry it out, I will have arranged a great distraction for the army.”

When Brooke arose before dawn, Carter Grey was switching from channel to channel. It was reflexive. For decades, Grey had been at the center of crises, making judgments that helped to shape events. Now he took painkillers and watched CNN.

Its focus was India. In communal prayer and protest, Indians filled the streets of major cities. The images saddened Brooke, and the next few sickened him—Hindus with guns and knives slaughtering hundreds of Muslims in Mumbai.

“Bad to worse,” Grey said. “The Indians have bombed Pakistani army bases in Punjab. Troops on both sides have mobilized near the border, and there are rumors the Pakistani military has declared a state of nuclear alert.”

“What’s the White House doing?”

“What you’d expect. At our urging, the UN is meeting in emergency session. The president has asked for restraint. The secretary of state is on the way to New Delhi, then Islamabad, trying to stave off disaster.”

Brooke’s thoughts moved quickly, the residue of a broken sleep spent arranging puzzle pieces. “Let me try something on you,” he said. “Suppose these attacks are about more than Kashmir.”

Grey looked up. “In what way?”

“The stakes for LET are high. There’ll be international pressure on Pakistan to shut them down; the civilian government will be forced to try. But what if this crisis results in a military coup by commanders sympathetic to Islamic extremists?” Brooke sat down. “To me, it’s at least not unimaginable that the attacks in India didn’t result from some reckless plan by LET alone, but from a

agreement between LET and elements of the ISI, the army, and, conceivably, the Taliban and al Qaeda.”

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Though his eyes remained serious, Grey gave him a quizzical smile. “An all-star team of co-conspirators? It’s possible, I suppose—the ISI is like the center of a wheel with jihadist spokes. It didn’t just help create LET. The ISI supported the Taliban when they fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, and introduced its leaders to Bin Laden. Once the Soviets left, the Taliban became al Qaeda’s host and protector with the ISI’s blessing—when we tried to take out Bin Laden in a missile attack on a Taliban training camp, the ISI warned them in advance. After that the agency realized that the ISI was so riddled with jihadist sympathizers that joint operations were impossible.

“As for LET and al Qaeda, from the beginning al Qaeda helped fund LET. When al Qaeda operatives fled Afghanistan, they hid in LET safe houses. LET operatives helped support al Qaeda’s attack on the London underground in 2005. All of which is known to senior leaders within the ISI.” Brooke sat across from his friend, regarding him intently. “Consider what happened after 9/11. When we invaded Afghanistan, Bin Laden and al Qaeda took refuge in Pakistan—along with the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, whose presence in Quetta is an open secret. As to Bin Laden, for almost a decade we couldn’t find him, though he was hiding in plain sight. There’s too much support for al Qaeda and the Taliban within the ISI and the military—”

“No doubt,” Grey interjected. “But the Taliban and al Qaeda aren’t synonymous. LET cares most about Kashmir; the Taliban is focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan; al Qaeda dreams of a worldwide Islamic caliphate. Some Taliban despise Bin Laden for bringing America down on their heads.”

“True. But LET, the Taliban, and al Qaeda are all Sunni. Their leaders know each other, and many trained together. They’re more than capable of making common cause against America or Israel.” Brooke’s tone became sharp. “When Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan with our encouragement, supposedly to stabilize civilian rule, she was assassinated in a crowd of ten thousand people. How do you suppose that happened?”

“My best guess?” Grey said. “A joint operation of al Qaeda and the Taliban, perhaps countenanced by her enemies within the ISI. But no one knows for sure.”

Brooke nodded in acknowledgment. “What we knew well before Bin Laden’s death is that senior leaders in the army and ISI hate America more than ever, as demonstrated once more when the ISI blew the cover of our station chief in Islamabad, forcing him to leave the country. Even moderates resent our pressure for an offensive against the Taliban, believe our buildup in Afghanistan is driving more jihadists into Pakistan, and think civilian deaths from American drone attacks have increased support for the Taliban. No matter that Pakistan is al Qaeda’s epicenter, or that our drones have killed key leaders like Bin Laden’s lieutenant Al-Masri. Our actions have tightened the operational links between the Taliban and al Qaeda, which may figure into what we’re seeing now.

“The WikiLeaks and the Bin Laden operation made public what we’ve known for years: that the ISI is still playing a double game—ostensibly supporting our operations, yet still aiding the Taliban and, at certain levels, al Qaeda. What matters to the ISI is control, which is why they arrested the Pakistani Taliban leader who started negotiating with the Afghans without the ISI’s permission. The ISI may not mind weakening the Taliban enough to keep them at bay, while leaving them strong enough to represent the ISI’s interests in a future Afghan government once we bail out.” Brooke finished his coffee. “In the minds of the ISI and the military, the Pakistani army has a choice—focus on India and Kashmir, or fight a bloody war against the Taliban and al Qaeda. What LET may have done is bring matters to a head.”

“Perhaps. But some of your overlords in the Outfit will suggest you’re turning boredom into



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