

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jake was back in New York the following day, unable to rest, devastated at having caused Isabelle's death. His whole body hurt, and his arms and legs were made of lead. Crushing muscle pain and weakness—an adrenaline overdose like his last hours in Cairo would do that, he remembered reading somewhere.

Looking into his bathroom mirror, he saw a wretchedly tired man. Pale skin, eyes swollen and lips seared—a faded image of his old self—determinedly pulling sagging facial skin sideways, trying clumsily to shave.

For the first morning hours, he was in a sort of fever, unable to think and profoundly disoriented. On the one hand, he felt a sense of closure. In the matter of Stephanie and Claire's deaths things had finally been put right. It felt unsubstantial and illusory, though. Revenge was nothing more than a concept now, swallowed by the maelstrom of guilt and remorse at Isabelle's death.

Though it was Sunday, he drove downtown to the office. He needed to focus on something—anything. He found Miranda there, catching up on her own work.

“Why am I not surprised,” Jake said dryly. “But you should be home recuperating from that disaster.”

“No rest for the wicked,” Miranda replied lightly, and he could tell she was trying to show him that she was fine.

“You’re not wicked, far from it,” he said, feeling new affection for her. She’d proven to be as resilient as he’d always suspected she was.

Jake spent the afternoon trying to re-establish some sense of normalcy but found himself unable to concentrate on anything beside his own emotions.

At four, Miranda walked in on him to find his head bowed over his desk, staring blankly into the tabletop. He glanced up, blinking with damp eyes, and forced a smile.

Before he could even muster some weak denial, she had hugged him. It felt all the more awkward in the office where they’d spent so many professional hours, but Jake took instant comfort in the human contact.

“It’s okay to hurt,” Miranda said softly. “Life isn’t going to be the same. No use pretending it is.”

Jake nodded, fighting the urge to shed tears he’d bottled since first hearing from the doctors that his wife and daughter were gone forever.

Instead, he said, “I’m sorry I got you into this.”

She mock-slugged him. “Are you kidding? I practically put a gun to your head. Don’t blame yourself for a second. Now, please. Go home. Get some rest.”

“You go ahead. I’ve got too much to get done,” he said, but it was a half-hearted protest. He’d been next to useless all day.

“Bullshit, Jake. There’s nothing that can’t wait until Monday morning. Let’s get a drink. We could both use one.” She bundled him out the door without further argument. They rode the elevator downstairs to the parking garage, discussing the best watering holes in the neighborhood.

Out of nowhere, a heavyset man approached them, weapon drawn. With him was a tanned clean-shaven man dressed elegantly in grey slacks and a blue blazer. This man’s deeply wrinkled face contrasted sharply with his youthful gait and full head of salt-and-pepper hair.

“Mr. Burke?” said the man with the gun. Jake recognized a slight Hispanic accent. “I’m Agent Delgado of the Central Intelligence Agency. I want to talk to you about Ashraf El Biali.”

“Sorry?” He tried not to betray any emotion. Miranda was silent, keeping an eye on the gun pointed at them.

“You know, our most promising lead into the higher echelons of Popular Islamic Jihad and the remnants of Al Qaeda?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Save it, Mr. Burke. Why do you think we let Ashraf Ismail leave the country after the bombing at FAO Schwarz?”

“What’s that?” Now Jake wasn’t acting. Had the Feds really *allowed* Ashraf to escape?

“*You. Arrogant. Bastard.*” Delgado shook with anger. “You actually believed that you and *only* you figured out the identity of the would-be bomber at the toy store that day? You thought he slipped through the NYPD’s grasp, and the FBI’s and the CIA’s—and only you, Jake Burke and his intrepid assistant Miranda, could hunt him down and kill him?” Delgado laughed grimly. “Sure. We found a lunatic Arab repeating ‘*Allah is great*’ in the rubble of a suicide bombing, and it never occurred to us he might be involved.”

“Well . . .”

“Okay, now you shut up and listen,” he said firmly. “I’ll lay this out for you. We had Ashraf under surveillance from the time he left the U.S. all through his time back in Cairo. He was obviously a pawn in a bigger game. So, together with the Egyptian security services, we waited for a key figure in his organization to reveal himself. Then you came along and killed Ashraf. Just like that. Mr. Burke, you caused irreparable damage to the national security of the United States.” Delgado seemed to look over Jake’s shoulder for an instant. Then his eyes met Jake’s again. “Now you’re coming with me.”

It was then that the second man, who had slid silently behind Jake, stabbed him with what felt like a very long needle. The last thing he heard was Miranda’s scream before it was stifled.

When Jake came to, he was lying on a couch in what appeared to be the living room of an ordinary house. His hands and feet were tied. The shades were pulled. Across the room, a television with the sound muted was tuned to CNN.

Miranda was still out, slumped in an easy-chair. She too was bound. Though groggy from the drug that had knocked him unconscious, Jake tried to sort out what was happening.

He had been kidnapped. By two men. The thickset man—Delgado—had said he was part of some official agency. The CIA. But that made no sense.

Jake's mind was clearing fast. These people couldn't be CIA. The CIA would never do this and expose itself to the inevitable scandal and lawsuit. Not if Jake were going to be allowed to live.

His mind moved on to Ashraf and the bigger fish his kidnappers had mentioned. Even drugged, he knew he'd screwed up.

As his vision came into focus, he realized that there was something different about the look of the TV screen: A larger than usual ticker was running beneath the newscaster's talking head. It read: TERROR ALERT: HIGHEST. The Department of Homeland Security had dropped the color-coded alerts, just to replace it with this new, and still ineffective, system. It was essentially the same, and it still warned the public about any unspecified threats that arose.

"Our man's awake," he heard someone say.

It was Sam Stone, the CIA agent who had visited him originally. Stone untied Jake and led him to another room, where another man sat at a dining room table. The blinds had been drawn in this room too. Jake recognized the second man as the blond guy from the garage. He still wore a day's worth of stubble.

Jake felt too weak to get angry. Stone offered him a chair across from the blond man. Jake tried to sit straight, but he was sore all over from being tied up.

A moment later Miranda was led in, looking frightened and disoriented. Stone gently showed her to a chair.

"You owe me," Jake said to the man from the garage. "You wrecked my car."

"I'm sorry about that." Same clear voice from the blond guy. "I had to do it. Don't worry, I'll make it up to you. For now I need to ask a favor from you."

"What's that?"

“Suspend your anger for a moment and accept that we’re on your side. You’ll be convinced of that soon.” Jake tried to place the faint accent in the man’s speech. “Can you do that?”

What choice did he have? Jake looked around him, at the all-American interior of this small house. It looked like something straight out of the ‘50s, a little like the set of Neil Simon’s *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, which Jake had seen with Stephanie some years before.

“Mr. Burke? Ms. Connelly?” Stone said, motioning to the blond man. “Allow me to introduce Danny Barzilai. Danny is with the Mossad—or was. They’re the Israeli CIA.”

Barzilai had to be in his early fifties; tall and athletic, he wore jeans and a faded black polo shirt. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Israeli?” Jake asked.

“Danny was an important player,” Stone said. “Pretty high up in the Mossad structure. He’s done a lot. Ever hear of the raid on Entebbe?”

“You were at Entebbe?” The main thing Jake remembered about the event was that it involved a daring commando assault on some hostage-takers in . . . was it Uganda?

Barzilai nodded. “No big deal.” He seemed to mean it.

“You’ll have to tell me about it some time,” Jake said, the words sounding absurd as he uttered them.

“Sure.” Barzilai’s upbeat tone sounded equally surreal. “My mother lived not ten blocks from here. I talked to her via long-distance before we took off.”

“Anyway,” Stone continued, “Danny’s been retired for a while. The Mossad let him go after he did a few things outside the limits of his authority.”

“I see.”

“This isn’t dinner at the club,” Miranda burst out, lucid and angry. “Let’s dispense with the chitchat and start talking about just who the hell you people think you are!”

The tense moment was interrupted when the front door opened and two more men entered.

“Ah,” said Stone. “Gerard Duvivier and Ramon Delgado. To answer your question, Ms. Connelly, Gerard is with the DGSE—*Direction*

*Generale de la Securite Exterieur*e. The French CIA, basically. Ramon Delgado is a colleague of mine in the Agency, a little higher up.”

These were the two men who had abducted them. Both had dark complexions, one with Latino looks, the other of apparent Mediterranean descent. It all made sense now. The warnings and finally the kidnapping had a single source: this group. No, wait. The FBI agent was missing, the one who’d shown up in the lobby of Jake’s building and told him that they needed no more help.

“No one from the FBI?” he probed.

Delgado smiled. “This doesn’t concern them. Their only involvement was when we arranged for them to talk to you. To see if they could make you stop. Too bad it didn’t work.”

Miranda was far from placated. “Well, now we know who everybody is, but are you out of your minds? Have any of you ever heard of individual rights in this country?”

“Come now, you’re unhurt, perhaps you can understand these are extraordinary circumstances,” Barzilai said carefully.

Sam Stone interrupted. “None of us have the time for apologies. We’ve got business to discuss. Ramon?”

Delgado began what soon felt like an interrogation. “What do you know about Iran?”

Miranda shrugged, and Jake answered for both of them. “No more than most people. Why?”

“Because Iran is a good example of why we’ve brought you here today. Let me tell you a few things about it. First of all, orders of magnitude. Iran is a big country, five times the size of unified Germany in area. Actually, its population is almost as large as Germany’s. You remember when they took the hostages in ‘79, don’t you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Jake wasn’t sure he appreciated Delgado’s didactic tone.

“Do you know why those hostages were released?”

“The way I remember it, they wanted to humiliate us. They especially wanted to humiliate Jimmy Carter, after he tried that rescue mission when the helicopters crashed in the desert.”

“Well, the conditions that Iran presented to the U.S. were the following: the release of eight billion dollars in frozen Iranian assets, the return of assets held by the Shah’s family, cancellation of our damage claims against them, an apology, and a guarantee by the U.S. not to interfere in Iran’s affairs. Guess how many of these were met.”

Miranda looked exasperated, and Jake was starting to feel the same way. “I have no idea.”

“Pretty much all of them. Now this may not look so terrible, but it was the beginning of all the problems we’re facing today.”

This sounded to Jake like an overstatement. “What makes you say that?”

“The Islamic revolution in Iran was two things. It was the first time we were humiliated in the Middle East and didn’t respond. It was also the beginning of an Islamic theocracy in Iran—and the birthplace, as such, of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism. It spread from there to the rest of the Muslim world, with no little help from Saudi petrodollars exporting Wahhabism, their own brand of strict Islam. And we didn’t do anything to fight it.”

“We thought it would soften with time,” Stone interjected, as he stood, stretched, and walked to the kitchen.

Delgado resumed command of the discussion. “It didn’t. We regained fifty-three hostages in 1980, and less than thirty years later we are paying for it with almost six thousand American lives, not including the World Trade Center. One hundred to one. How’s that for a shitty ratio? And it’s only the beginning.”

Six thousand Stephanies and Claires. Jake could hardly listen to Delgado’s speech.

“Jake? May I call you Jake? How about I throw some facts at you.”

The phony-bonhomie routine, Jake thought with distaste. “No. Don’t throw facts at me. I’ll tell you when I’m ready for that,” he said, his mind now totally clear, the lingering effect of the drug finally gone. “Right now I want you to explain yourself. Who authorized you to do what you did? You *kidnapped* us, for God’s sake.”

“They must’ve known it was the only way to make us sit through their little history lesson,” Miranda added, with biting sarcasm.

“Is kidnapping any worse than killing a foreign national in his own country? Removing an intelligence target that could’ve provided invaluable leads? Our only mistake was not abducting you sooner.”

Jake wasn’t satisfied. “Why couldn’t you just talk to me? Tell me what was going on and ask for my cooperation, the way you are now?”

Delgado shook his head. “The game has changed entirely, for a number of reasons. We all agree now that events have presented an opportunity—”

“If you already knew about Ashraf El Biali,” Jake interrupted, looking to Sam Stone, “and you didn’t want me involved, why did you come to me in the first place, asking me questions, telling me that the bombing was ‘special’ or whatever?”

Stone waved off Delgado before he could cut in. “We were looking for a potential third participant. If there was a second bomber, why not a third? It turned out to be a false lead. It was just El Biali and the dead bomber. We’re—”

“Everything will become clear if you let me continue,” Delgado said. “There’s a lot you need to know.”

Jake crossed his arms over his chest, looked at Miranda. She nodded, though she was staring at Delgado with overt skepticism. “Okay, go ahead.”

“All right, here are some more facts. Number one . . .” Delgado touched his right index finger with the left one, “in the State Department’s most recent report on ‘Patterns of Global Terrorism,’ Iran was called ‘the most active state sponsor of terrorism.’ They spend approximately seventy-five million bucks annually for terrorist-related activities. It’s in their national budget.”

“Really?”

“Really. Hezbollah is a major recipient.” Delgado went on. “Number two, and this is one we’re reading a lot about in the papers these days, even being knee-deep in oil Iran is engaged in a major nuclear effort. Despite concerted worldwide pressure, they’re on the brink of realizing the dream of the Fundamentalist Islamic bomb.”

Jake nodded. The press was having a field day with that one.

“Three: Iran already has the capability of reaching Turkey and Israel with its missiles. We—the CIA—have been able to confirm reports that Iran could launch a ballistic missile capable of reaching the U.S. very soon.”

Stone interrupted. “And they might not even need these missiles. By paying a few thousand dollars, people are smuggled daily through Mexico into the U.S. For a country with national budget line-items for the support of terrorist activities, how hard do you think it’d be for Iran to get nuclear explosives smuggled into our territory?”

Delgado looked irritably at Stone. “Will you let me finish?” He turned to Jake. “Finally, number four: All attempts at constructive engagement have failed. The Europeans tried it and what they got, which ain’t bad, is some lucrative oil and industrial turnkey contracts. In the meantime, the Iranian mullahs have shut down more than fifty newspapers, confiscated satellite dishes, prohibited public demonstrations, imprisoned and killed dissidents, intellectuals and students. And all of this, mind you, happened mostly during the two terms of their supposedly reformist president. And now with this hard-line president . . .”

Jake nodded again, impatient for Delgado to get to the point.

“And now I ask you this: If you saw what I just described—a theocratic totalitarian country that still calls us the Great Satan, that supports fundamental Islamic terrorism worldwide, that has struck against America several times, that’s building a nuclear bomb and will have the capability to hit us; if you saw this, and you saw an American policy that clearly isn’t working, would you do something about it?”

The room fell silent, all eyes on Jake and Miranda. Most of the hostility had drained from Miranda’s body language.

“I’m beginning to get the picture. You’re not officially CIA here, are you?” Jake was actually starting to like these people.

“Not today.”

Jake nodded. “It explains why we’re talking to two Americans, an Israeli, and a Frenchman. I think I understand the two Americans and the Israeli being here,” he said. “But why a Frenchman?”

“Let me add to your understanding of why *I* am here,” the Israeli offered. “The Mossad used to be an efficient, effective organization. We

weren't always kosher," he smiled, "in our methods of action, but we got things done. We live in a tough neighborhood. When you live in a tough neighborhood, you don't apologize when you're pushed—you push back twice as hard, and you show the other guy that you'll hurt him badly if he messes with you. But due to outside pressure, and also its desperate need for peace, Israel has forgotten the lesson it learned over the past half-century: that outreach, negotiation and compromise, which civilized people see as the only ways to resolve conflicts, are seen by Arab leaders as lack of resolve. Weakness that can and should be exploited."

"Come on, Danny. Israel's been hitting back very hard," said Gerard Duvivier.

The Israeli sipped from the glass of water that Stone had placed before him. "Not even close to what it takes. This government is trying once more to revive a peace process from a position of weakness. It won't work. Power gets respect in the Middle East, nothing else. Do you remember the suicide bomber who blew himself up at that discotheque, killing all those teenagers? The only daughter of my best friend was there. She lost both her arms. One right under the elbow, and the other was blown out at the shoulder. She's blind in one eye and her face isn't a face anymore. She's sixteen. Can you imagine that?"

Jake shook his head but at the same time thought, does this guy know about *my* family?

"She's happy to be alive, or should be," Barzilai continued, looking even more serious than before. In fact, he looked stricken, bereft. "Her boyfriend was killed."

Jake saw the other men around the table looking down and away. "Sorry to hear that," he said.

"The police found out that the bomber had prayed in a nearby mosque just prior to the attack. This information was leaked by someone in the department who's not, shall we say, sentimental about the so-called Peace Process." He snorted. "An angry crowd of Israelis surrounded the mosque and started throwing bricks and rocks. The men inside shouted slogans and threw stones back.

"When I arrived on the scene, the Israeli Police had surrounded the building in order to protect those inside. I speak Arabic, and I heard one

of the men talking while he was escorted to safety. He was boasting to another one next to him, saying, 'Didn't I tell you there was no danger? Youssouf is in Heaven with his virgins, we have done Allah's will by helping him, and these pathetic dogs can't hurt us.'

"That man was shot the following day. His killer was unknown, and a note was left on him saying . . ." The Israeli's blue eyes looked upward, toward the ceiling, as he strained to get the words exactly right. "We will hurt those who hurt us. We will kill those who kill us." He looked again at Jake. "There was no proof of my involvement in the killing. The Mossad sacked me anyway."

The room fell silent. Again, all eyes were on the outsiders.

"Are you aware that I also lost my daughter?"

"That's why I thought you should hear the story of my . . . friend's daughter. Because it's so similar."

Jake understood that he wasn't expected to answer. He breathed deeply. "And you think dealing with Iran's the solution to everything?"

"It's the key to keeping the U.S. and Israel safe, for sure. America's the Great Satan, but we in Israel are Little Satan. I'm not kidding, that's what they call us: Satan Junior! It's actually sort of humorous, don't you think?" He smiled, then sobered again. "Seriously, Iran will have nuclear warheads that can reach us in a matter of months. Nukes to sneak into the U.S., too. Isn't that something to worry about? Never mind that Iran's been sponsoring 'ordinary' terrorism against Israel for decades. Make no mistake, Mr. Burke. These guys are our mortal enemies." Barzilai paused.

After a moment, he looked pointedly at Jake and added with what seemed to carry special significance, "They're yours, too."