

Steel gates blocked the Cadillac. As the driver displayed identification cards, the prison guards looked from the photos to the back seat of the old car, comparing the photos to the face of Abdulkarim Maranaki. A guard signaled the gate operator. The motor-driven gates rolled into the thick concrete walls and the car continued into the courtyard of Qasr Prison.

The chauffeur drove through the tree-lined courtyard, passing the administration building and the gates of two cell blocks, then stopped at the third. Maranaki left the Cadillac and went to the iron bars of the gate.

Two Revolutionary Guards sat at a table beside the walkway, drinking tea and arguing. They went silent when they saw him, standing quickly and opening the gates. They passed him without a document check. Other Revolutionary Guards stood inside the entry to the two-story brick cell block. Their conversation died as he passed. Maranaki pushed through the double doors to the quiet corridor.

Before the Revolution, this cellblock had housed wealthy and influential opponents of the Shah. The windows of the cells viewed landscaped grounds and pine trees. Tiled hallways and plaster walls painted with brilliant white enamel gave the cellblock the look of a villa. The prisoners had enjoyed a recreational center and meals cooked by their own servants. Doctors and nurses tended elderly prisoners or prisoners suffering from long-term illnesses. This changed with the Revolution.

The Ayatollah had granted this cell block to the Guards of the Revolution for the detention of special prisoners. Most enemies of the Revolution went to Evin Prison for interrogation and-- if not execution-- Islamic re-education before their release. The Revolutionary Guards held prisoners here in total isolation. Unlike Evin

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Prison, no other prisoners could bring news or take out information. No visitors came here. No prisoner had ever escaped from the cells-- the windows now bricked over, the doors double-locked, the halls guarded by survivors of the SAVAK prisons. And as in Evin Prison, interrogations continued until death or total co-operation.

Pausing at the guard's glass-doored booth, Maranaki checked his reflection. The short, wiry officer prided himself on his coarse appearance. He kept his beard cut as short as his hair to emphasize his freedom from vanity. His beaked nose and heavy eyebrows jutted from his profile. He wore a black suit but no tie with his shirt. A tie would be a concession to European convention. Instead, he buttoned his white shirt tightly around his throat. He had discovered that this stark, uncompromising appearance unnerved the decadent and immoral prisoners seized by the Revolutionary Guards. Before the Revolution, he had taught the children of the poor in a small village south of Tehran. Now he taught lessons to the enemies of Iran.

Maranaki called for the guard who carried the keys. Without a word, the bent-back young man-- his spine twisted by beatings in the torture cells of the SAVAK-- followed Maranaki and unlocked a double-barred door.

The cell stank. Maranaki entered alone. Closing the door behind him, he stood and stared at the naked prisoner chained to the wall. Loops of chain secured his out-stretched arms. Another loop cut into his waist. More chain immobilized his feet. Excrement and blood puddled under the ex-officer in the Shah's Air Force. Maranaki and his assistants had subjected the pilot to a series of tortures, starting with lashing with a steel cable, progressing to electric shock, then to shock combined with injected chemicals. Though he had screamed and pleaded to be questioned, to be told his crime, they did not demand a confession or the names of other conspirators. They had investigated this pilot before arresting him and knew he and his family to be innocent of any counter-revolutionary actions. The object of

the torture had been to make the pilot understand how much pain they could inflict, to make him fear life more than death.

"Open your eyes!" Maranaki demanded, his voice rising to a high-pitched shriek.

The young man lifted his head. One eye squinted, the lid heavy with a clot of blood where the lash of a steel whip had cut his eyelid. Blood had clotted in a line across his face. Many other lines of blood criss-crossed his body.

"Do you doubt this place is Hell?" Maranaki asked him.

Desperate to avoid more torture, the pilot gasped out, "I will answer. I will answer any question. Only what do you want to know? What do you want? How have I offended Allah?"

"We have your mother and father. Your brother. Your sisters."

"No! They are innocent. They know nothing. My brothers and sisters are only children. They are all innocent."

But Maranaki knew this also. The pilot could have defected to America or Europe, like many other of the Shah's pilots. But he had remained in Iran rather than leave his mother and crippled father to care for his younger brother and sisters. He had flown in the war against Iraq until the lack of spare parts grounded the Iranian Air Force. He then volunteered for the front and commanded an anti-aircraft battery, sending his Air Force money home to his parents. But his loyalty to Iran and his love for his family had condemned him to this cell.

"They are beautiful children. Your brother will go to the degenerates. Your sisters will be ours--"

The pilot jumped against the chains, a scream rasping from his throat.

"And your mother and father will cry for the mercy of Allah--"

"No, no, what was my crime? What is it that you want from me? What do you want?"

"Your martyrdom."

Without explaining, Maranaki left the cell. The twisted jailor secured the double locks. Maranaki went to the door of another cell. Inside, a sixty year old man slept on a cot. A hand across his forehead shielded his eyes from the light of the single glaring bulb hanging from the gray ceiling.

This man-- a commercial airline pilot-- had plotted an escape. He and another pilot had schemed to steal a cargo jet from a German company, intending to escape with their families to Europe. A suspicious technician had betrayed the pilots. Waiting until the pilots and their families had gone to the airfield, Revolutionary Guards took them in the act. The other pilot had thrown himself on the rifle of a captor to commit suicide. All the others-- the dead pilot's wife and child, the old pilot's wife and children and grandchildren-- went to Evin Prison. The pilot had not been tortured. He had confessed to every detail, taking all the crimes upon himself to free the families. But he had observed the interrogations in the cells of the prison. He knew the horror of the tortures.

"Criminal."

The white haired pilot looked at Maranaki, his eyes steady. "Are you speaking to me?"

"You who sinned against the Revolution and Allah."

"I committed no sins."

"The sentence will be death."

Closing his eyes, the pilot seemed to sleep.

"But I can grant mercy to the others, all the others who would have accompanied you on your flight to the nations of Satan."

"What do you want?"

"You are a pilot. If you volunteer for martyrdom, your family will be freed from the curse of your sins."

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After almost a minute of silence and thought, the pilot countered. "If you will free my family and the wife and baby of my dead friend, I will fly against Iraq."

Maranaki left the cell without correcting the pilot. The pilot had accepted the sentence of death in an attack. Let him believe that he would attack Iraq. When the time came and he learned the actual target, Maranaki would still hold his family. The pilot would not condemn his children and grandchildren to the horror of death in Evin Prison to save the lives of a few hundred Americans. ***

In an office of the Foreign Ministry, Under Secretary of Exports Abas Zargar listened to the report of the small, rat-faced torturer. Abdulkarim Maranaki stood in the Persian splendor of the office in his tight, badly-fitted black suit, the sleeves emphasizing his bony arms, his pants wrinkled, his off-white shirt buttoned tight around his hairy throat. He described the backgrounds and qualifications of the two pilots, then detailed the dedication of both men to their families. As if he described the operation of a machine, he spoke of the threats against the innocent families in an even monologue, his voice a high-pitched drone.

Secretary Zargar listened without comment, stroking the lapels of his French-tailored suit. The absurd appearance of the little man-- he looked like a rat dressed in black-- created the conflicting impulses of laughter and dread. Even the Revolutionary Guards feared this fanatic in the tight suit and prison haircut. Would he see the foreign clothing of the Secretary as decadent, as a sin against the relentless horror of the Revolution? Would Maranaki suspect corruption-- rather than duty-- as the reason Zargar often flew to Europe? Zargar resolved to never again wear a fine suit to a meeting with this fanatic-- only a black suit of low quality Iranian cloth. If the Revolution continued to turn and devour its spawn, Zargar did not want to be one of the first taken in the next purge. A day's warning would give him time to escape to his apartment in Paris. Only after thinking of a good tailor in Tehran

could he put aside his fears to concentrate on the planning of the attack on America. When the torturer-fanatic finally concluded, Zargar asked the most important question:

"Will they accept this action irregardless of the target?"

"They have no loyalty to America."

Though the preparations for the attack required that Maranaki know the attack would be against Americans, secrecy did not permit this torturer to know who would die and where. He would learn only if the attack succeeded. And this made the two skilled, experienced pilots uncertain elements.

"Are you absolutely--"

"We will hold their families in Evin Prison. The pilots know their families will suffer hell on earth if they lose their courage. And if they do, there will be a third pilot whose devotion to Allah and the Revolution is absolute."

"Who is this?"

"He has not flown an aircraft since the Revolution, but he came to us with the dream of martyrdom in a crash into the palace of the monster Hassan. This man gave two sons in the Revolution and his last son at the front. He wants to join his sons in Paradise."

"What is this man's state of mind?"

"His sons. Now he has only his life to offer to the Revolution."

"Can he be trained?"

"Yes. And I know when I tell him the target will be Americans, he will praise Allah in prayers of thanks."

Zargar dismissed Maranaki. "Good. We will proceed. Inform me if there is any problem with the pilots."

Alone in his office, Zargar considered the separate elements of the attack. He had a few minutes to think before his appointment with Fahkr Rajai.

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This attack required skilled, intelligent pilots to navigate for hours along a difficult course before hurtling into suicide. Maranaki had found those pilots. The third pilot-- the grieving father who sought out death-- would enforce the martyrdom of the others. Zargar would confirm the background of the volunteer, then order a brief training session. The man would only need to take control of the plane in the event of a last moment failure by the other pilots.

In Argentina, a Swiss agent-- who received his money from Panama and believed he worked for Colombian drug smugglers-- had already purchased a DC-4 airliner. An overhaul of the engines and mechanical systems by qualified technicians would be complete in a few weeks.

Days before, he had received a cable indirectly relayed from Mexico confirming the purchase of tons of dynamite in the United States. A second shipment of U S-made C-4 plastic explosive-- purchased in the United States and shipped to Libya by an American ex-soldier-- had already left Tripoli.

Now came the role for Rajai. The young Revolutionary Guard intelligence officer had served for a year in Lebanon, supervising the formation of the Hizbullah militias and co-ordinating their actions with Syrian and Iranian objectives. His months of careful, tedious organizing had allowed the team of architectural and explosives specialists to exploit the weakness of the Lebanese government and the naivety of the Americans. Though the Syrian and Iranian specialists had received the praise for the bombing, much of the credit belonged to Rajai. Zargar intended to offer Rajai a central role in the next action. Though the world would never know the sponsors of the attack, another victory against America promised glory and distinction within the closed society of the leadership of the Revolution.

The intercom buzzed and the voice of his clerk announced, "Fahkr Rajai."

Zargar left his desk to receive the young man. Framed in the oiled carving of the ornate entry and doors, Rajai looked like a French diplomat. Others had told

Zargar of the young man's international knowledge and savoir faire, but his debonair appearance-- an expensive Italian suit, a pale blue shirt and brilliant blue silk tie, his grooming impeccable-- came as a complete surprise. How could this fashionable young man of Iran's Persian elite command units of fanatics? Waiting until his clerk closed the doors, Zargar rushed forward and greeted Rajai in French.

"What a pleasure to finally meet you, Fahkr. I reviewed your contributions to the Beirut victory and demanded that the leaders of the Guard allow me to personally request your assistance in this project."

"I was only one of many," Rajai replied in perfect Parisian French. "And I sacrificed nothing, unlike the martyrs. I bow in awe to their spirits--" The young man gave a perfunctory nod. "-- and offer my prayers."

"Yes, the martyrs. They will live in our prayers forever."

"I also pray," Rajai added with an ironic smile. "That we will have many volunteers for martyrdom. The Revolution cannot yet afford guided missiles."

Zargar laughed. He threw an arm over the young man's shoulders and walked with him to the desk. He indicated a velvet upholstered chair and took his own seat behind the desk. "All my years in Paris and I did not meet you until today. I seemed to know all the families in exile, all the students at the university. But somehow I did not meet you. How did that happen?"

"I often travelled with my father."

"And what degree did you take at the University?"

"I did not complete my studies. The university thought my father's business an unworthy enterprise and would not accomodate the many interruptions in my education. I made the choice to travel and learn."

"Experience rather than textbooks and lectures. Very good. Very pragmatic. Perhaps your wealth of experience with other peoples explains your success in Lebanon."

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"I was fortunate to have the Americans and the Israelis and the Christians as enemies. My work only accelerated the inevitable."

"Do you work with Palestinians there?"

"Yes."

"All factions?"

"Yes."

"Even the mercenary Palestinians?"

"Many of the units are mercenaries. Ideology attracted recruits, but money maintains the forces. Leaders who have no money, have no soldiers."

"Could you, with money, recruit Palestinian soldiers?"

"With money and a telephone, this hour."

"They must be loyal allies of Iran, ready to fight our enemies."

"They fight one another in disputes over the meanings of words. For money, they will kill our enemies."

"The enemy will be the United States--"

"They are all enemies of America."

"They must be soldiers who are brave, worthy of our trust, who obey without question, yet of no importance to Iran. If martyred, they can be no loss."

"There are millions of Palestinians. If a few die, their women will give birth to more."

"And they must have no knowledge of you, their sponsor. And they must know nothing of the action they guard. They will be dispatched, they will fulfill their role, and then-- through the unfortunate circumstances of the endless war against the Satans of the West-- they will be granted martyrdom on a very distant front. If one or more are captured, they must believe the story they tell their torturers. But the story will be only a story, a clever illusion of truth."

Rajai considered this for a moment. "It can be done. Without great difficulty."

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I know it has been done many times before."

"Your file mentions that you once visited Argentina, Chile, and Nicaragua."

"My father sold weapons to those countries."

"And how is your Spanish?"

"Spanish? This operation will be in South America? Central America?"

"How quickly you understand. But you will not travel there. Do you have experience with other countries of the Americas?"

"In passing. To be truthful, my father had very little business there. But if you want Latin allies for an operation against the United States, recruit the allies in Paris.

Or perhaps now, Nicaragua. If this will be an operation which pleases Nicaragua, I will recruit in Nicaragua. It will be impossible to conceal the recruiting from their secret police, so it must have their approval. If not, then Paris."

"But what of the French counter-intelligence?"

"I will identify myself as a Libyan agent. The Libyans and the French have an agreement. It is common knowledge. If I plot the death of Americans or other foreigners outside of France, I may operate without restriction. I will be expelled only if I plot murder in France or the murder of French citizens."

"It will be Paris. But remember, this will be a stunning event in world events. Even the French may be obliged to act."

"What have they done after Beirut?"

"This will not be the killing of a few soldiers."

"What will be the target?"

"I cannot tell you that until the last days of the operation. Will you accept this assignment?"

Zargar watched the young man for a reaction. He saw Rajai's eyes focus on the intricate, interlinked designs of the colorful hand-knotted carpet at his feet. Then he looked up, smiling with a charm sudden and strange from a

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officer of the Revolutionary Guards.

"Do I accept the opportunity to fly to Paris? Yes."

Zargar laughed. "Yes! To Paris! Consider it a reward for the victory of twenty-third of October! Now we will discuss the details of your new assignment"

As their conversation continued into the late afternoon, Rajai sat across the desk from the paunchy Secretary Zargar and studied his gestures, the inflection of his affected French, his pompous insistence that he controlled the operation. Rajai had understood this bureaucrat the moment Zargar had left his desk to shake hands and mouth effusive French. The bourgeois fat man had not conceived the operation and he would not execute it. He controlled nothing but the assignment of the details.

Two tests confirmed Rajai's first impression. The joke of martyrs as cheap missiles had tested the bureaucrat's commitment to Shiite Islam. Instead of ordering his immediate arrest and interrogation, Zargar had laughed. The joke of leaving the Bekaa for Paris had confirmed his estimation of Zargar. The bureaucrat had no greater joy than the decadence symbolized by Paris. And now he believed Rajai to be like him.

Point by point, as Rajai clarified the scope of his new assignment and discussed the organization of the Palestinian and Latin American mercenaries, he learned the limits of Zargar's knowledge. The bureaucrat knew the means of the attack and the device to be employed. But he did not know the target. Also, he knew only the approximate date of the attack.

When they concluded their meeting, Rajai learned another detail. Zargar told him to enjoy the trip to Paris, as Zargar could not travel until after the victory. Rajai walked alone through the dark hallways of the deteriorating Foreign Ministry-- the

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offices had closed an hour before-- and considered the comment. The commander-- or the committee-- heading this operation had limited Zargar's knowledge, then restricted his travel. Whatever the target of the attack, Zargar knew enough to win sanctuary in the West by selling the little information he possessed.

This attack would destroy a very significant target. Zargar had stressed to Rajai that all the mercenaries-- Arab and Latin-- would be liquidated. For the bombings of the French and American barracks, the Syrian and Iranian specialists had maintained tight security, but the attack required the co-operation of several militias. No one demanded the liquidation of the militia support units. But Zargar had stressed that the coming attack required absolute sterilization-- no one could remain alive to bear witness against Iran.

Then, in a flash of the obvious, Rajai realized he would be liquidated also. He stood on the steps of the Ministry as the gray, smokey evening descended on Tehran. Along the boulevard, a few lights flickered on. Motorcycles and cars raced past. A legless cripple from the Iraqi front guided a motorized three-wheeled scooter. Glancing at Rajai in his foreign suit and holding an American briefcase, the cripple sneered and called out a curse Rajai did not hear through the noise of the boulevard.

If he surrendered to his first impulse and fled to asylum in France or the United States, Rajai lost his chance to join the leadership of the Revolution. He had weeks to think and plan. The assassin would come for him only after he had completed his assignments.

Did Zargar know Rajai would be liquidated? No, he did not have the discipline to mask the knowledge. He would revel in his superiority over the condemned assistant. In fact, Zargar believed participation in this strike against America promised recognition and advancement for Rajai. As Rajai reconsidered his role in the operation and the position Zargar held, his thoughts calmed. Zargar the fat,

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stupid bureaucrat had survived the SAVAK of the Shah and the SAVAMA of the Ayatollah to hold a continuing staff position in a series of conspiracies against the United States of America.

To survive, Rajai knew he must change his role in the operation. He must cease to be a valuable, but expendable lieutenant and become a director of operations. He could not wait for promotion-- waiting meant liquidation. Instead, he would advance himself to the next logical position in the structure of the conspiracy-- the office of Zargar.

The pompous, pleasure-loving fat man had survived the SAVAK and the SAVAMA. But he would not survive Rajai.

Randall Mason followed the rush of arriving passengers through the terminal. He scanned the travellers clustered around the payphones but did not see Salah Freij. Continuing out to the sidewalk, Mason ignored the line of taxis and drivers. He stood at the curb and waited, his eyes searching the sidewalks and crowds for the Palestinian wearing a blue jacket and bright orange cap. Around him, businessmen entered taxis, travellers met their families, vacationers rented cars at the agency booths. Mason watched for Freij.

Mason wore jeans and a denim jacket. Lizard-skin boots added inches to his height. His Caribbean tan completed the carefully-contrived image of Jack Brown, independent transnational entrepreneur. The thin, middle-aged businessman had left his wool suit and conservative identity in London at one the previous afternoon. He arrived at New York's J F K International Airport as Jack Brown, an Australian-born legal resident of the United States who operated a gold mining company out of an office in Las Vegas, Nevada. Another flight took him to Chicago, a third to Los Angeles International Airport.

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Mason closed his eyes against the fatigue. He longed for a gin and valium. The uncertainty and anxiety of the business in the United States kept him awake throughout the flights as he reviewed every detail in his mind, thinking of a thousand different scenarios for failure-- and years in an American prison. The jet roar of a plane startled him awake.

Beyond the taxis and the lanes of traffic, Salah Freij leaned against a fence. He wore an Los Angeles Dodgers jacket and a Kerr-Magee cap. With a mustache and long sideburns, the Palestinian looked Mexican. Mason went to a crosswalk and waited with a group of laughing elderly couples talking of Arizona. He crossed to the parking structure and a horn sounded. Not turning, not changing his course, Mason continued to the center of the covered parking lot. He glanced behind him to see that no one followed, then cut through the rows of cars to another lane. Freij stopped a ten year old Chevrolet van beside him. Mason slid open the cargo door and got inside. He leaned between the front seats and asked:

"Any problems with the cargo?"

"All of it came," Freij told him as he continued to the toll booth. "No police, no government. No problems."

"And the loading of the truck?"

"Almost. It will be done tonight."

"Thank the Lord." Mason took a pint of Beefeaters from his travel bag and broke the seal. He downed a ten milligram tablet of valium with a gulp of gin. Laying down on the carpeted floor, he emptied the bottle and slept.

Five hours later, Mason looked out at the desolation of the Mojave Desert. To the west, the last light of day faded behind the Argus Mountains. The sulfurous stink to the evening air indicated that they approached Trona, a small town of

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mineral processing plants and independent mines. The United States Bureau of Land Management controlled vast sections of the desert and granted rights for the exploration of mineral resources. Hundreds of prospectors-- working alone or as the employees of major corporations-- searched the deserts and barren mountains for gold, silver, and strategic metals. Only the China Lake Arsenal and the Death Valley National Monument remained closed to exploitation.

Headlights flashed past. Freij maintained a steady speed through the rock foothills. The lights of the Kerr-Magee West End facility appeared. A vast expanse of a salt flat extended to the eastern horizon. The minerals of the ancient lake provided the raw materials for the conveyors, sifting towers, chemical pools, and column separators of the plant. Freij sped past the noise and dust of the facility-- the industrial plant on the east side of the highway, the rows of identical trailers for worker housing on the west. Mason choked on the chemical stink and lit a cigarette. He forced himself to concentrate on the image of stacks of American currency, the green and black inks, the intricate geometry and scrolling of the engraving-- only a fortune to be paid in one hundred dollar bills could induce him to come to Trona.

At the Circle K gas station and market, Freij turned off the highway. The van bumped over the rocks and rutted sand of the wide street. Mason saw groups of Kerr-Magee employees in the market parking lot, standing around their pick-up trucks drinking beer out of brown paper bags. The lower classes of the world wasted their few hours of liberty in remarkably simular idylls: Welsh miners drank in pubs, Iranian laborers tea in cafes, Americans beer from aluminum cans. Only their wealth distinguished these Trona louts-- as evidenced by their Japanese four-wheel-drive pickups and motorcycles-- and the decline of the American military/industrial empire would soon strip them of their luxuries.

Small stucco houses lined the street. Pick-up trucks and motorcycles parked in the driveways. Dogs barked. The lurid colors of television came from the

windows. Mason loathed it all. How had this nation of ignorant, inarticulate, uncultured louts come to dominate the world? But tonight would be the last time he endured this desert town.

Freij parked at sheet steel warehouse. The wide rolling doors provided for access by trucks or skiploaders transferring freight from the railroad siding running behind the warehouse. Beyond the rails, high chainlink fences blocked access to the Kerr-Magee Trona facility. Why the sulfur-processing plant required a high-security fence, Mason would never understand. Wages chained the employees to their work-- with or without a fence, they could not escape. And who would want to steal sulfur?

"An old man came," Freij told Mason as they went to the warehouse door. "A miner. He said he mined gold for many years. Said we give him job, he help us find gold."

"You sent him on his way, I trust?"

"Told him come back next month, when boss here."

Unlocking the alarm system first, Freij then unlocked and opened the door for Mason. The door opened to an office with walls decorated with full color promotional brochures of Dinkum Enterprises, Limited. Freij reset the alarm circuit, locked and barred the door, then unlocked the inner door.

The pre-fab steel sheet warehouse had a length of twenty five meters, a width of twenty meters, and a ceiling height of six meters. Under the glare of worklights, Freij's three-man crew of Palestinians continued the tedious labor of unpacking dynamite from wooden shipping crates. The first man assembled an exact count of the paper-rolled sticks of dynamite into bundles. The second put the bundles into heavy duty plastic trash bags, knotted the bags, then slipping the plastic-bagged bundles into empty five-gallon cans. The third man poured drilling mud-- a thick gray semi-fluid used by oil crews to seal the air space around drill bits-- over the bags until he filled the can. A row of filled cans waited for lids and sealing tape.

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A Mexican cassette played while the men worked. All the men had cut their curly hair short. They wore denim overalls and work boots. In the two weeks since a closed van brought them from the Mexican border, they had not left this warehouse, eating, sleeping, and working without seeing daylight or the neighborhood outside. Mason had provided cassette stereos and video tape decks for their entertainment. All the music and movies had English or Spanish lyrics and the television channel selector had been removed. The Palestinian crew did not know where they had worked these two weeks. When deliveries arrived, only Freij spoke.

Freij had already assembled the television and personal effects of his crew in preparation for their departure tonight. Only the empty dynamite crates and the Dinkum Enterprises brochures would remain.

A diesel truck and flatbed trailer had been parked at the far wall. Nylon straps secured a shipping container to the trailer. A ramp led from the floor into the cargo container. Mason crossed to the ramp and walked into the container.

Stacks of five gallon steel cans stood from the floor to the roof of the container. The stacks went from wall to wall, without a hand's width of space between the stacks and the walls. The volume of cans would not allow the cargo to shift in transit. The cargo lacked only three side-to-side rows to be complete. The last layer of floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall cans would be solid drilling mud. Mason counted the number of unsealed cans remaining and the last black plastic bundles of dynamite.

Less than an hour's work remained.

In a white stucco house on the street leading to the warehouse, an agent of the U S Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Bureau listened to the monitors of three radio receivers. Each receiver had a reel-to-reel recorder taping the incoming

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signals. Voices and an echoing noises came from monitor speakers. The overweight, balding agent adjusted the volume on one receiver and noted the time on a log sheet. He shouted out. "They're moving out!"

"What?" In the small living room, another agent watched a football game. A man in his mid-thirties, the agent had the broad shoulders and hard body of a newcomer to the Bureau.

"Shut it off!"

After reluctantly switching off the television, the second agent heard the sound of a diesel engine. "Is that the truck?"

"Look out the window," the other agent called back.

The agent went to the front windows and looked through the shades. He saw the lighted interior of the warehouse as men pushed the high doors to the sides. The warehouse went dark. By the streetlights, he saw men carrying bags and boxes to a van parked outside.

A diesel cab appeared. From the other room, the agent heard the sound of the truck's engine transmitted by the contact microphones and transmitters placed on the steel building. Slowly, carefully, the the truck emerged from the warehouse pulling a container shell on a trailer. As the trailer cleared the warehouse, men pushed the doors closed, then ran to the waiting van. The van followed the truck and trailer away.

"They're gone. White Chevrolet panel van, red semi pulling a trailer. White male caucasian driving the semi. Phony Mexican driving the van. I saw three others get in the back of the van."

In the bedroom, the older agent telephoned the information to an address only two blocks away, a rental cabin in a motel across the highway. "You see them coming down the street? Get on them. I'm calling the office."

He hung up and keyed a number. "This is Alfred over here in Trona. Mason

and his Arabs are on the highway."

Driving all night on dexadrine, Mason approached the Mexican border at ten in the morning. Signs in English and Spanish advertised businesses in Calexico and Mexicali, two small towns divided by the international border but depending on their geographic and political position for commerce. The trade between California and the Mexican state of Sonora created a two-way flow of people and commerce second only to the San Diego crossing.

Mason would exploit this international flow to move the ten tons of dynamite out of the United States.

But he would not drive the truck to the border. Leaving Highway 111 three kilometers before Calexico, he maneuvered the truck and trailer through the streets of Heber, a small town of Mexican-American agricultural workers. Several turns took him to a dirt lane of modest frame homes surrounded by large fenced yards. Freij followed him in the van. Chicano children watched the Anglo truck driver park the truck and trailer in a field already rutted by heavy truck tires. A semi-truck-- the cab shell tilted forward to expose the engine and transmission-- stood on concrete blocks at one side of the field. Freij stopped on the side of the dirt street and waited as Mason went to the cottage next to the field. He carried a notebook.

Luis Mendez, a gray-haired Mexican with a beer belly overhanging his belt, opened the door as Mason wiped his boots on the wooden steps. Like Mason, he wore jeans and a denim jacket. "Mr. Brown, you are exactly on time. No problems on the desert?"

"American deserts are nothing. Could drive kiddy carts out there. Rig I drove across the Nullarbo-- three trailers. Like a bloody train. Here are the documents. Brought it all."

"The papers, yes. Very, very important."

"The documents on the truck, on the trailer, the container, the mud, the destination-- everything you asked for and everything the port authorities in Mazatlan requested. My agent there will of course have copies also. But just so there won't be any misunderstandings on the highway, you have copies of everything."

Easing into an iron patio chair, Mendez put his bare feet up on the porch rail. "Very good. And Mr. Brown, I know it is your business and of course it is all arranged, but if you must change your arrangement, I can drive the truck to Guatemala and go direct to the oil well. If things change."

"It's the company's decision. I know they don't want the truck going across the Guatemalan border. They think the sea is better. It's their problem. They think they can save money with a Mexican port and a Guatemalan ship. We will see, won't we?"

Nodding, Mendez leafed through the photocopies in the notebook. "Not my problem. I will leave today. Your mud will be there in two days."

"And then the agent takes it. So best of luck to you, Mr. Mendez."

"You are leaving already? You will not come in for breakfast? Or for coffee?"

Mason pointed to the van on the street. "My associate is waiting. Rushing back to Las Vegas. But I thank you very much for your kind invitation."

"Then adios, Mr. Brown."

"Goodbye and all the best to you."

The Englishman hurried to the van. Seconds later, the van disappeared around the corner. Mendez waited on the porch, looking from the parked semi-truck and trailer to the dust hanging in the morning sunlight. Then he looked down to the cigarette pack bulging one of his jacket flap pockets and said, "So, gentlemen, did you hear everything?"

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"Yes, sir," a voice called from inside the house. "You did great. Come on in."

Two young men waited inside. Both wore the work boots, polyester pants, and long-sleeved shirts favored by the local workers. But their boots and clothes looked new. Nylon jackets with the logo of International Harvester covered their shoulder-holstered pistols. Mendez gave them the notebook of photocopies, then took the microphone and transmitter out of his jacket pocket.

"Now the government takes the truck?"

"No, sir. You take the truck, as agreed, to Mazatlan. Exactly as you agreed."

In an eighth floor conference room of the Federal Building on Wilshire Boulevard in West Los Angeles, a group of officers met to informally discuss Randall Mason. Larry Gelb of the Customs Department stood with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, staring out the window at the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Gelb listened as Julia Sula of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms briefed the officers of two other bureaus on the English weapons smuggler. The officers represented the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the United States Attorney.

"Sources in the Panamanian banks documented the transfer of funds," Sula told the men. In her severe gray suit and reading glasses, the dark-haired young Latina woman looked like a banker herself. She read from the typed summary in a flat emotionless tone. "From the Bank of Azadegan-- an institution wholly-owned by the Iranian government-- to Mason's account in Panama, then to his account in London. Surveillance observed Mason meeting several times with Iranians in London. Surveillance observed Mason departing for the United States in the casual clothes he affects for his role as Jack Brown, an Australian national. In New York, Immigration allowed him to pass his

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forged passport and visa without challenge. Surveillance followed him from New York to Chicago and then to Los Angeles.

"In Los Angeles, Salah Freij, a Palestinian who once worked with the Syrian-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, took Mason from the airport to Trona, a small desert town near Death Valley, where Mason had rented a warehouse for the operations of the fraudulent mining company he had established.

"Surveillance had already noted the arrival of tons of commercial explosive. We sent a man to look into the warehouse. He spoke with Salah Freij, who pretended to be a Mexican. Our man, who has many years of travel and residence in Mexico, observed that Freij is not Mexican.

"A few hours after the arrival of Freij and Mason, our teams in place saw a van and a truck towing a cargo container from the warehouse. Surveillance teams followed the van and truck to a town on the Mexican border and then to the house of a Mexican national with a history of involvement with drug gangs. This man has worked with American authorities for the past ten years. Mason then turned the truck and cargo over to the Mexican for transport to the port of Mazatlan.

"Mason then returned to Los Angeles for a return flight to London. Freij and three other Palestinians crossed into Mexico at Tijuana. We have a Mexican surveillance team following the Palestinians but we doubt the team will be successful in following the Palestinians until they exit Mexico.

"As to the explosives, technicians placed tracer beacons on the container and sent a team to Mazatlan to learn the destination of the explosives. We will follow the explosives until they are delivered to the end user."

Concluding the reading, Sula set down the typed pages. "Questions?"

George Harcourt, an assistant director in the West Coast office of the FBI, ran his thick, scarred fingers through his thinning hair. A fifty-three year old executive who won promotion after promotion for his daring in field work-- sometimes using

his karate and judo to subdue felons-- he looked from Sula to Gelb. "Why, for heaven's sake, didn't you grab this jerk? You'll never get him extradited from England. And these P L O terrorists? You just let them wander off into Mexico?"

"We want to know where that dynamite's going." Gelb turned away from the window and paced the conference room. A thin, long legged man he had also worked as a Federal prosecutor before transferring to the Customs Department, he consciously avoided speaking legalistic jargon. "Mason buys weapons for the Iranians. Then they put him to buying this dynamite. It has no military use. So what do they want it for? And for who? We arrest Mason, we lose any chance of following it to who'll use it."

"When do you foresee prosecution in this case?" Allan Rempel, the representative of the U S Attorney, asked the question which concerned his office.

"The English would extradite for the dynamite buy, wouldn't they?"

"I believe so" A pale, overweight young man with black rimmed glasses and wispy blond hair slicked sideways, Rempel stared at the far wall as he composed his thoughts. "Yes, they would extradite. But I believe they would view the illegal purchase of commercial explosives as less than world-threatening. And therefore, they would assign a very low priority to the case. Perhaps they would claim we had filed on the case only to bring him within jurisdiction, so that we could take him for violations which they do not consider to be crimes. I would anticipate a very lengthy delay."

"Then let's don't bother," Gelb told him. "Can you agree to that?"

"A continuing investigation. No problem."

"Any problem with that, Harcourt?" Gelb asked the FBI man.

"I don't like it. World would be a better place with him in a penitentiary."

"We want to continue the investigation indefinitely. Even if he comes into the U S again."

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"And not take him? Then why bother following him?" Harcourt demanded.

Sula answered. "I am certain-- absolutely-- that a man of Mason's sophistication with weapons and munitions would know of the identification elements present in every commercial explosive manufactured in the United States. He cannot expect for his sponsors to use the explosives without betraying the source. And I believe that may be the object."

"What?" Harcourt asked. "Repeat that."

"He intends for the United States to be identified as the source of the explosives."

"Question is, why?" Gelb stressed. "So if we trace that shipment to where it's going, maybe we can find out who the Iranians-- or the Palestinians or whoever-- are going to hit. And that'll probably answer our questions."

Harcourt did not accept that. "Answer your questions, yeah. But what's that worth if this Mason is out loose? When you get the information, it'll be too late to put him away. He could disappear. Take his money and retire. I'll go along with your indefinite investigation if it leads to something. When you get your information, what will you do with it?"

Gelb considered his reponse. He glanced to Sula, signaling that she could repond. She did not. "It's terrorism. Terrorism's on the news all the time. People in the Pentagon always talk about fighting terrorism. I'll take this to them. See if they can think of something interesting to do."