

BLOW THE HOUSE DOWN

A Novel

Robert Baer



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A N O V E L

ROBERT BAER



CROWN PUBLISHERS / NEW YORK



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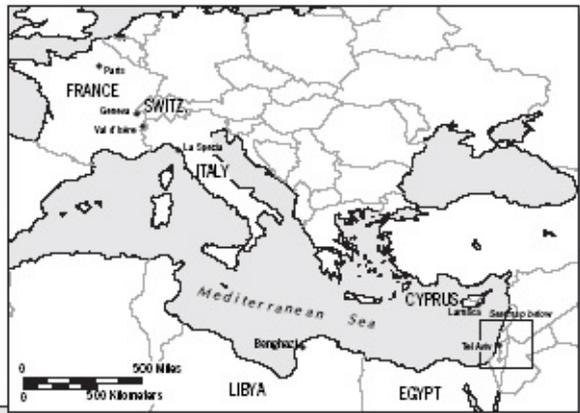
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PROLOGUE

YEARS LATER, after the unthinkable happened, I would remember where I was when it all started: in a car on the Beirut-Damascus highway, still a young man who believed the good guys always won and with no idea that the colleague I was trying to contact on the radio was already facing his executioner.

“Carson, Carson, this is Lone Wolf. Over.”

Damn, still no answer.

“Carson” was Buckley’s radio call sign—Bill Buckley, the CIA chief of station in Beirut. It was March 16, 1984, and I had a meeting with him at eleven—one I wasn’t going to make. There’d been a firefight earlier that morning in Aley, and a Druze militia checkpoint was backing up traffic.

Bill wouldn’t be surprised. Long ago he’d gotten used to my not being where I was supposed to be, operating solo, disappearing for days at a time, dragging in who knows what.

When Bill had me come work for him in Beirut in 1983, he assigned me the radio call sign “Lone Wolf.” Everybody else had towns in Nevada. The nickname stuck.

“Anyone copy? This is Lone Wolf.”

Someone finally keyed a radio. I heard static; then Art, the commo chief, came up on the net: “Lone Wolf, get off net immediately. Return to Reno ASAP.”

I switched off my Motorola, wondering what the fuck was going on.

Only when I got into the station did I learn Buckley had been kidnapped two hours earlier.

Bill left the house every day at exactly twenty to eight, and that morning had been no different. He took the elevator to the ground-floor garage, where he checked carefully underneath his car for a bomb before starting the engine, because while Bill was regular, he was also cautious, and the Honda underside had no armor. Satisfied, he backed out of his parking space—the same space every day—and started for the garage exit.

My guess is that Bill looked in his rearview mirror that morning and saw a car blocking his Honda. He got out to see what the problem was. Someone grabbed him from behind, hit him with something hard on the back of the head, threw him in the rear of the other car, covered him with a blanket, and

tore off. Brutally efficient speed, surprise, and force. That's how I would have done it. There were no witnesses. All we had to go by was the open car door.

Getting Bill back was all the station cared about. But trying to survive ate up most of our time. We were operating at something like a 75 percent casualty rate—losing people and assets faster than we ever did in Vietnam or Laos. Washington wasn't calling it a hot war, but that's what it was.

Then, in July 1985, we picked up chatter that the “big crate was broken.” In the shadow world of intercepts, our best guess was that the big crate was Bill. There were other hostages, but Bill was the most valuable to his captors. No one was ready to sign Bill's death certificate yet, but it was hard to maintain the fiction he was coming back.

One report with the ring of authenticity had it that Bill had been grabbed by a Sepah-i Pasdaran colonel who went by the name of Murtaza Ali Mousavi. (Sepah-i Pasdaran is shorthand for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the spearhead of the Islamic revolution that Ayatollah Khomeini wanted to spread across the Middle East.) A couple low-level informants told us that an Iranian by that name had recruited the suicide bomber who drove an explosive-packed GMC pickup truck into the lobby of our embassy in Beirut. One bizarre description had him looking almost Western—blue eyes and reddish hair. Mousavi also supposedly recruited the suicide bomber who drove a truck into the Marine barracks near the airport.

There were rumors, too, that Mousavi might be behind a particularly inventive monstrosity. At the peak of the Lebanese civil war, the Christian militia started finding their people dumped near the port with small holes drilled through their foreheads. What they eventually came to believe was that a sadistic dentist had been anesthetizing the victims' foreheads, drilling the holes, then sucking out the brains with an aspirator, one of those things dentists use to keep patients' mouth dry while they're working. I asked around and was assured a dentist's aspirator couldn't suck out a brain. *Maybe*, though, with a stiff suction probe.

The hard part came when we tried to put some meat on the name. We had no stable indices on Mousavi—no birth certificate, address, phone number, even a photo. One of our few leads came from Father Martin Jenco, the Catholic priest who had been kidnapped in Beirut in January 1985 and held for more than a year and a half, at least part of that time in the same apartment with Buckley. During his debriefing, Father Jenco told us that when his blindfold fell off one day he found himself face-to-face with one of his captors: a man with blue eyes and red hair, the Western features we'd heard about before. Father Jenco also thought the same captor might have been the one who spoke fluent English—American English complete with slang. But he couldn't be sure because of the blindfold. Were they one and the same, and was that person Colonel Mousavi?

I recruited a young Lebanese Shia from Beirut's southern suburbs who thought he could get inside Mousavi's network, maybe even tell us whether he really did have red hair and blue eyes. The kid had gotten caught up in the Islamic resistance against the Israelis. By the time I met him, he wanted out. He set about cultivating Mousavi's people, and I met him every two weeks at the Museum Crossing on the “Green Line,” the no-man's-land between Christian East Beirut and Muslim West Beirut, the safest place in Lebanon back then.

At one point when the kid was rummaging around in a safe house, he came across a Motorola radio and had the smarts to copy down the serial number. It matched Bill's Motorola—the same one I tried to call him on the day he disappeared.

The kid hadn't gotten far enough inside the network to meet Mousavi and confirm hair and eye color, but as much as there was any certainty in Lebanon, the kid was it. Then, one morning a Lebanese police officer on duty at the Museum Crossing called to say they'd just found the body of a young man. He had a small card in his shirt pocket with my name printed on it. Otherwise there was no identification. Did I know anything about him?

I did, of course, and as soon as I saw the quarter-inch hole drilled in the kid's forehead, I knew how he'd died. I was now convinced the dentist was real, and just maybe Murtaza Ali Mousavi too.

I didn't report any of this to headquarters. You start sending back gruesome details like aspirated brains or betray any hint of an obsession, and they pull you out on a wack-a-vac and send you to some clinic for deprogramming.

But I kept pushing and soon after we picked up a lead that Mousavi's group was operating off a low-power, push-to-talk radio net. Our regular signal intelligence sites couldn't pick it up, so I talked the station into renting an apartment overlooking the Shia southern suburbs to see what I could find on a scanner. After a couple weeks listening, I came across an interesting net. Everyone on it used call signs and coded names, places, and times.

I taped all the important intercepts and wrote down everything I thought might matter. Telephone numbers, addresses, and names—all went in my spiral notebooks. After six months I'd filled three of them. That's when we got the break I thought might crack everything open.

Another informant—a good one—told us that until the start of the revolt against the Shah, the elusive colonel had been a Ph.D. candidate in mathematics at UCLA. Later, we heard much the same from Terry Anderson, another hostage held with Buckley: Not only did his captor claim to have attended UCLA and the American University of Beirut, but he had a strange accent—almost American but with a peculiar rolling *R* as if he'd learned French before English. "Sounds more Iranian than Lebanese," Anderson said.

We immediately checked all the visa and immigration records, but there was no indication that Mousavi had ever applied for or received a visa, either in Beirut or Tehran. I got a friend in the FBI Los Angeles field office to run out to UCLA. He came up empty on the name, but an FBI informant did remember a French-educated Iranian studying there in the early seventies. He had been writing a dissertation on a subset of non-Riemannian hypersquares, whatever that is, until he dropped out of the program, short of a Ph.D.

When the registrar pulled up the records for my FBI pal, the Iranian student's name was missing—digitally stripped out. The paper application, along with a photo, was gone, too. The registrar had

never seen anything like it before. The only useful lead came from a professor in the mathematics department: He recalled a brilliant Iranian graduate student who had “sort of rusty hair.” But since the student was a loner and never showed up for lectures, he couldn’t tell us much more.

I had been transferred out of Beirut when in late 1991 Bill Buckley’s headless, decomposed body was found dumped like a dead dog in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

Confirmation that Bill was dead didn’t diminish my interest in finding his kidnapper—if anything, heightened it. But I wasn’t in a position to do much about it until my many sins finally caught up with me, and I was yanked out of the field in January 2000 and brought back early to Langley to die a slow bureaucratic death. I was sure the trail had gone cold by then, but I started going through the databases anyhow, and eventually I found a reference to a photo of an “Ali Mousavi,” taken in Peshawar, Pakistan, archived to an inactive informant’s file. It was a long shot, but I ordered the file from the Archives.

It turned out to be harder than it should have been. Archives said they couldn’t find the file, so I took the day off to look myself. I never did find it, but I finally turned up the photo: a posed shot of five people standing in a garden. Behind them was a cinder-block house with a couple of half-dead bushes and a barbecue pit. In the middle was Osama bin Laden, clutching what looked like a Koran in his hand. To the left of bin Laden was someone in a salwar chemise. Something about him, his hands, maybe, suggested that he was Caucasian, a Westerner, but his head had been carefully scissored off. To bin Laden’s right stood a young man in a galabiyah. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen. On the far right another young Arab wore a kafiya and held up an AK-47, partly covering his face.

What really got my attention was the person on the far left of the photo: a slight man, maybe five feet six, dressed in a rumpled polo shirt and jeans. He looked aloof, as if he were uncomfortable being there or having his photo taken. He was also the only one whose features were too defined to be Arab. Since the photo wasn’t in color and the resolution was lousy, I couldn’t be sure, but his hair was something other than jet-black. The absence of any caption didn’t help either, but I had a hunch I had never been closer to the Murtaza Ali Mousavi I had been following for fifteen years.

What I couldn’t understand, if this was Mousavi, was what he would be doing with Osama bin Laden? If there was any constant in the Middle East, it was that Shia Muslims like Mousavi detested Sunni Muslims, especially uncompromising Sunnis like bin Laden, who considered all Shia heretics best put to the scimitar.

The headless somebody was also an anomaly. For a start, the salwar chemise was caved in, the way the clothes are on very old or very sick people. That his head was missing wasn’t all that unusual. Faces and other identifiers of CIA officers get cropped out of photos sent in from the field, even when they’re marked *Secret*. But the chances of this guy being CIA were close to zero. None of our officers was ever in touch with bin Laden, in spite of the silly myth that he was the CIA’s creation. So who was

the headless horseman? And who were the other two young Arabs? The picture was intriguing, but was getting me nowhere.

I needed someone to identify the players. If the dating on the photo was right, John Millis was in Peshawar when it was taken. John had since gone on to become chief of staff at the House Intelligence Committee. I gave him a call.

We met at the Tune Inn, a dive on Pennsylvania Avenue a few blocks from the Capitol—me in a pair of faded khakis and a tattered, wrinkled blue oxford shirt and Millis in his Joseph A. Bank, all-weather, light wool suit. We were as mismatched as you get in Washington.

After the waitress brought us our burgers and coffees, Millis pulled the photo out of the manila envelope and took a close look at it.

“I used to walk by that house,” he said with a smile. “That’s where bin Laden lived. I’d see him on the front from time to time—had the impression he was friendly. Where’d you get this picture?”

“I thought you’d tell me. It was sent in from Peshawar when you were chief.”

“I don’t remember it.”

“See anyone else you recognize there?”

“I don’t know. Looks like the normal crazies who washed up in Peshawar in those days.”

Millis pulled a pair of fold-up reading glasses out of a sleek metal case, fitted them carefully to his ears, and took a closer look. When he was through, he held the photo to one side so I could see all the faces. He began pointing, starting with the guy to the right of bin Laden.

“This one was a Gulf prince, a true believer who took up digs with bin Laden. He couldn’t have been more than twenty. And this...” He stopped, held the photo closer, then held it out again so I could see. “This guy on the far right you should know.”

“I should?”

I tried to imagine whoever it was without his head wrap, without the AK-47 muzzle blocking half of his face, minus the two-week-old stubble.

“A Palestinian,” Millis was saying. “He was with bin Laden, and then ended up in Hamas. Nabil did something.”

I saw it then: Nabil Shahadah. After Afghanistan, he’d gone on to head up the military wing of Hamas. Nabil was the architect of the first suicide bus bombings in Israel, a lord of mayhem.

“And the headless guy? Was he ours?”

“Why would you think that?”

“You know, the head cut out. Why else—”

“Sorry. Like I said, I don’t remember the photo.”

Millis was losing enthusiasm, all but yawning, itching to leave. The rule is, you never want to lead source. But I had to get him to focus on the guy in the jeans and polo shirt with the light hair. I picked up the photo again.

“Any of these guys Iranian?” I finally asked, pointing at the man on the far left, the man with the fine features.

He checked his watch, stirred his coffee although it had long ago grown cold.

“How’s your kid?” he said. “A girl, right? Sally?”

“Rikki. She’s okay when she’s in school in England and I can talk with her. She’s not okay when she’s home on break and her mother takes a hammer to her cell phone every time I call.”

Millis seemed not to be listening.

“Think this guy is an Iranian?” I asked again, my finger still under the head of the guy on the far left.

Millis ran his forefinger across the faces and shook his head no. “I don’t think so, but that was what more than ten years ago. Wasn’t there a cable or a file that went with the picture saying who’s who?”

“There was a reference to a file, but Archives can’t find it. They’re still looking.”

Millis smiled. He knew what the chances were that the file would ever turn up. CIA Archives is the Bermuda Triangle of official records.

Millis slipped the photo back into the envelope, then motioned the waitress to come take her money and started to slide across the banquette.

“Gotta go, Max. Appointments.”

“Just look at it one more time.”

“Sorry. Maybe another—” His hand hit his coffee spoon as he spoke. The spoon tipped the coffee. What was left inside spread itself over the table until I could throw a fistful of napkins down on the mess.

He stood up. “Can I have this?” he asked, his voice suddenly softer. He was holding up the envelope by its corner. “I want to show it to someone. You have a dupe, don’t you?”

“Yeah. But the photo belongs to an operations file.”

“You said you have a dupe, though, right?”

I should have said no to Millis's keeping the picture. I did have a copy, but letting any part of a ~~operations file go out of the Directorate of Operations is a gross violation, even to a Hill staffer with~~ more clearances than I'd ever have. I let him have it, though. Maybe he would remember something about the guy on the far left, given time to think. Millis was practically family, or so I told myself.

The next evening when I got home, I had a message on my answering machine from Millis: "Let's meet. Call me. I got a name for you."

We never met. Before I could call Millis back, he blew his brains out in a Fairfax motel room.

CHAPTER 1

New York City; June 21, 2001, 11:02 A.M.

“Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge, this is Selma. How do you copy?”

“Five-by-five.”

“Baton Rouge, no movement. Che is still at his last.”

“Roger that, Selma. Maintain your current. Over.”

THE TWELFTH FLOOR of the Deutsche Bank building on Park isn't a bad perch on Midtown: close enough to the pavement to spot the twenty-something MBAs, cell phones glued to their ears, bullshitting about make-believe deals; just high enough to appreciate the grid, the grandeur, how easy it would be to bring it all down with a dirty nuke. But there I go talking shop again.

London's more cosmopolitan. Paris more tarted up. For stolen wealth per square inch, there's no place like Geneva. But Manhattan is where the real money is. Something like half the currency in the world flows electronically through this city every day of the year. Close your eyes and you can almost hear the trillions zinging around the local cyberspace. All that money gives the city a sort of divine energy, and Madison Avenue writes the Bible, selling crap no one can afford to people who don't need it, from Edsels to Viagra and Brazilian butt lifts. No wonder the jihadists go to bed every night dreaming of pulverizing the place. (The fact that one in three Jews in America lives here doesn't hurt either.)

Personally, I've had my fill of pulverized rubble. Beirut, Khobar, Nairobi—I know the way it smells when it's still smoking and soaked in blood, and how easy it is to make. Load a pickup with half-fuel acetylene tanks, fertilizer, and fuel oil, and you can take down most anything man-made that you can get under or inside.

I used to think spending the best parts of my life in the worst parts of the world was worth something, but my employer saw things otherwise. I'd reported one too many unpalatable truths, poked Foggy Bottom in the eye one too many times, told my own seventh floor to fuck off in one too many ways. “Intelligence” may be the snake oil we sell, but the one absolutely inexcusable character flaw inside the Beltway is candor.

After a quarter-century in the field, headquarters called me home early and put me out to pasture in an office park near Tysons Corner. The plan was to tie me up watching over a flock of retirees until shuffled off into my own sunset, but that couldn't happen until I hit fifty, four years from now. In the meantime, I was working off a time card: eight-to-five, no weekend duty, all the “personal days”

needed. That's what I was doing right now: taking a Thursday to see friends in Midtown. Another gaper in the capital of grit. Or so I thought.

"Hey, c'mere and have a look," I said, staring down at Park. I tried to put a little urgency in my voice, enough to pry Chris Corsini away from his high-performance, posture-fit Aeron chair and triple-wide LCD screens. But Chris was a commodities trader. The only things that got him excited were seasonal draws on oil inventories and his annual bonus.

"No, I'm serious. Come here and take a look at these two."

Chris sighed as he pushed himself to his feet. "What's it now, Max, King Kong on the loose again?"

That's what I liked about Chris: Ever since I'd rappelled down the side of Sproul Hall into the dean's office, back in our undergraduate days at Berkeley, he'd decided I was a headcase. But unlike a lot of our classmates, he never held it against me. Maybe I helped balance out the picture-perfect wife in Darien, the three way-above-average pre-teens, and the metallic silver Porsche Carrera.

"There," I said, pointing him toward the corner of Forty-ninth and Park, but Chris wasn't seeing what I was.

"Hmmm, let me think a minute." He was drumming his fingers on the marble sill. "Ah, the three smokers in front of the UBS building across the street! Sky's falling! I'm moving everything into gold."

"Take another look."

"At what, Max? Help me out here a little."

"Those two," I said, directing his eye to a guy and a girl, maybe in their late twenties. "The hip pair in front of Quick and Reilly."

The guy was hip, all right: mini-dreads, black wife-beater, patched black suede pants, Timberland boots, no socks or laces. The girl was basic black, too—faded bodice and denim bottom with built-in creases, carrier bag hanging from her shoulder—except for lavender highlights and a pair of those Puma arsenic-orange and powder-blue sneakers.

"You see something I don't?" Chris asked.

"Can't be sure. Maybe it's that they don't look very comfortable in those uniforms, like they'd put them on for the first time today."

Chris hung by me a moment, made a kind of pitying cluck with his tongue, then walked behind his desk and sat back down. "Max, I'm curious to know how you make it on your own in this world. You're nuts."

Truth told, I had spotted the two of them earlier when I was walking down Park. They were clearly interested in me, so I'd given them both a hard look as I passed by, and they had turned instantly

away. That's about as telltale a sign as you're likely to get from static surveillance, and nothing the were doing now was making me change my mind. Every once in a while, the girl would glance over the guy's shoulder, in the direction of the Deutsche Bank, and then say something to him before turning back. The guy never stopped talking into his cell phone. My bet? A walkie-talkie. Without scanner, though, I couldn't be sure.

"Gotta hop," I told Chris, picking up my jacket. "I need a favor, though."

"What about our lunch? I pushed people all over the place to make room. You're like some goddamn senile cat, scampering off for no reason at all."

It was an old bitch. Bolting for no apparent reason is one of the things I do best—that and manipulation, betrayal, and lying. Only the highest professional standards. The irony is that Chris knew the truest thing about me I'd ever told anyone. We were drunk junior year, burning hemp, sitting on a bluff staring at the Golden Gate Bridge, when he finally got around to asking me how my parents had died.

"I don't know," I told him.

"How can you not know?"

"I don't know if they're dead."

"Give me a break."

And so I told him everything: Mother's two husbands, neither my father; the grandfather who insisted I call him "Sir"; the bonds, the coupons, the trust fund; all the houses we lived in as if Mother were determined to book a season in every climate zone America had to offer. How when I was thirteen, she had signed us up for an archaeological expedition in Baluchistan, straddling the Pakistani-Iranian border. How I'd woken up one morning two years later to find a note tacked to the center tent pole: "Max—I've left with Ravi [another archaeologist—a real one—fifteen years her junior] to look at a great dig. I shall be back in two weeks. Mother." Not "Love, Mother." Not "Dear Max." Not anything like it. That was the last time I saw her. Those two weeks had stretched to eighteen months before my aunt learned from dear Mother that she'd left me at the end of the world and booked a small tribe to come get me out.

"What the fuck did you do while you waited?" Chris wanted to know. "Live in a cave and eat bullshit?"

"Actually it wasn't too bad. A family took me in. They had a son my age. We rode horses, played soccer. I learned Baluch."

"That's fucking bullshit."

And there's the double irony: Of all the cock-and-bull tales I had told Chris in the twenty-odd years since—the weird excuses for not showing, the weirder ones for leaving early, the improbable investment consulting firm that provided my Washington letterhead, and on and on—I was sure the

Baluchistan story was the one he least believed.

“C’mon, Chris,” I said. He was back to swapping Nigerian crude. “This’ll take ten minutes.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about now?”

“The favor. All you have to do is stand by the window and watch those two.”

“Why would I want to do that? You really are nuts.”

“Maybe. But my hunch is that they’re tailing someone in this building—maybe one of your colleagues; hell, maybe even your boss.”

Chris looked at me as if he was deciding whether to call security.

“It happens, sweetheart. Honest. The husband’s sitting on his ass at home, laid off and stewed on midday martinis. Suddenly it dawns on him that the mother of his children has hooked up with the mailroom boy, so he calls in a private eye, and bingo! Fireworks hit the fan.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“It’s a fabulous business these days,” I pushed it. “Everyone’s screwing everyone.” Rule Seven: Create the context before you risk a truth. Rule Eight: Don’t let the context twist in the wind. “Or maybe they’re watching me.”

“Right, Max. And I’m Princess Di and you’re Dodi whatever the hell his name was. Drop the paranoid act. No one’s following you.”

Chances are he was right. (The *why*, for one thing, left a hole big enough to drive the Pyramid through.) But high-octane paranoia is as addictive as morphine and far more useful. There is no such thing as an accident, no coincidence, no luck—they taught us that on day one at the Farm.

I’ll never forget Joe Lynch, the course director, walking up behind the podium that first morning and, without so much as a nod, asking, “Who ran a countersurveillance route coming here just now?” All of us wide-eyed career trainees looked around the auditorium, trying to decide if Lynch was joking. The Farm is a maximum-security facility with more deer than people. Only one road of any consequence runs through it. You’d have to be Vin Diesel with brains to even get inside the place. Still, Lynch had made his point: Always assume you’re being tailed even when you are sure you’re not. It’s the only way to keep your edge, not get sloppy, not get caught.

I couldn’t tell Chris any of that, of course. Like a lot of friendships, ours depended on a certain degree of ambiguity, augmented in my case—and maybe in his, too—with a healthy dose of harmless virtual reality. A moral no-man’s-land.

“Listen,” I said, “I was seeing this girl, and...”

Chris bit, back on familiar ground once more.

“Bound to happen,” he said with a shrug.

“What?”

“Hundreds of women. One Max. One of ’em was bound to get pissed off enough to come after you.”

“Chris, listen—”

“I mean it, Max. You really are like a goddamn alley cat. You slink in and out of people’s lives. M
I don’t mind that much. I’m not looking to bed you down, but—”

“The point is...”

“Remember that chewing-gum heiress who was stuck on you way back when? Get it? *Stuck* on you
What did that last? Seven months? A fucking world record. After Marissa.”

In fact, I’d already asked Chris to be my best man when it dawned on me that I liked having s
with the heiress more than I liked her, just about the same time she realized that she preferred the ide
of me to me in person.

“Youthful indiscretions,” I said. I needed to get Chris back on track. “Lookit, this little piece o
work is different. Very vindictive. Worse, she’s got the money to indulge her anger.”

“What’s her name?”

Name? Volunteer nothing, and never give up a detail you absolutely don’t have to.

“I cut her off cold,” I said. “No five stages of grief with this one. Just checked out. Left h
steaming. I wouldn’t put it past her to put a tail on me, or worse. Chris, I could use a little help here.”

Chris turned serious again. “Come on, Max, we’re too old for this. I’ve got work to do. You ca
watch the watchers yourself.”

“That’s precisely what I can’t do. If I do something stupid like walk out of here and look over m
shoulder, bend over to tie my shoe, or stare into a display window to see what’s going on behind m
they’ll know I spotted them.”

“So? Isn’t that the point?”

“Yeah, you do that and whoever is running this little show will bring in a new team I won’t spo
It’s the way these things work.”

Chris wasn’t buying into it, but he hadn’t said no. It was up to me to close the deal.

“Trust me,” I told him, “this chick is totally unzipped, a psycho. She’ll do me harm given th
chance. I gotta know sooner rather than later whether she’s got a tail on me.”

I picked Chris’s cell phone up off the desk, poked my cell number into it, and put it back down.

front of him. “See this little button with the green telephone on it? Push that in ten and tell me what happens. That’s all you have to do.”

Chris tapped his fingers on the desk, adjusted his neck in his starched white collar, shot his wrist out from an equally starched and beautiful tailored French cuff, and gave his watch a good looking-over.

“Okay, okay. But you know, Max, it’s not easy having you as a friend.”

He rolled his wrist a few more times just to make sure I didn’t miss what was wrapped around it. The watch looked as if it had cost enough to feed an entire Afghan village for years.

“A new toy, eh?”

“A Breitling.” He was beaming. “It’s got a micro-transmitter in it that works anywhere in the world.”

“In case you get kidnapped?”

“No, asshole, I bought it for sailing.”

I laughed. “Yeah, just the ticket next time you’re blown out of Long Island Sound and end up lost in the Azores.”

“One thing, Max. How do you know that that’s the way these things work?”

“What things?”

“Not tipping off a tail.”

There was something new in Chris’s voice—a genuine curiosity. Maybe he was seeing me for the first time as I was, not as he wanted me to be. Maybe he was thinking about dumping his own little side plate. At this point, I didn’t care.

“Some guy I met in a bar,” I said. “He told me all about it.”

CHAPTER 2

“Baton Rouge, this is Selma. Che’s on the move. South on Park.”

“Roger that. We’ll take it from here. Over.”

ALWAYS DRESS TO FIT someone else’s story line. If that means a sensible black cocktail dress, suck it up, eat your stomach, slip it on, and go shopping for a strand of pearls and size-sixteen pumps. I could no longer remember who told me that—some Old Boy, six gins to the breeze, like they all are these days—but it was another piece of advice I’d never forgotten. To Chris, my worn-at-the-elbows lined jacket, baggy olive chinos, and scuffed maroon loafers said gentleman consultant, a guy who didn’t need to drape himself in hand-stitched Hugo Boss to set his table. For my fellow pedestrians waiting to cross Park at Forty-eighth, my clothes and dead-on stare—immune to noise, traffic, skyscraper muggers, usurious bankers, fee gougers, and prying eyes—typecast me as someone who had wandered out of the Upper West Side on his day off. Trouble was, I didn’t know what script the surveillance team in front of Quick & Reilly was reading from...if it was a tail, if they could read, if I wasn’t just listening to the squirrels racing around that cage I call a brain.

I crossed with the light, then headed for the underground passage to Grand Central Station. I wanted to take a quick look up Park in the direction of the Quick & Reilly pair, but flying on instruments was the only way. If I was going to have any eyes in this game, they would belong to my old pal Chris twelve stories above me. It was up to him to decide whether or not to use them.

I was out the underground ramp and halfway across the Grand Central concourse, flogging myself with the usual self-doubts, when my cell phone chirped cheerfully in my jacket pocket.

“I told you you’re nuts. As soon as you crossed Park, they took off. No one’s following you, Ma. No—”

“What direction?”

“What what?”

“North, south, east, west? Manhattan’s laid out on a grid, you know.”

“North. Uptown.”

“When did they move? Be exact, Chris. It’s important.”

I had my eyes on a Middle Eastern-looking student carrying a pizza box just right for a ten-pound load of plastique. Maybe a platter charge to levitate the 11:53 to Poughkeepsie.

“The two of them left just as soon as you crossed Park and headed south.”

“They walked north, right? Went on foot?”

“No. Someone picked them up and drove them up Park.”

“Someone?”

“A van.”

“Hotel van? JFK shuttle?”

“How would I know? It didn’t have anything written on the—”

“Did it have a sound stick on top?”

“A what?”

“An antenna. Short. Stubby. Maybe—”

“I didn’t—”

“Were other people in it?”

“I couldn’t tell. There weren’t any passenger windows. You couldn’t see in. Max, Jesus, I was looking out a twelfth-story window!”

“You dumb guinea peacock. A 747 could land on Park and you wouldn’t notice. But tell me, how often do you see someone picked up in front of Deutsche Bank in a windowless van?”

“All the time. Never. It’s not something I ever think about.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Uh, Max. It’s not me who wants to hear you singing soprano in the choir.”

“Thanks. You’re a dear.” I shut off the cell phone before Chris could say anything more.

What bothered me about the Quick & Reilly pair wasn’t so much their existence as their tradecraft. They should have been doing sentry duty way down Park or watching from inside that unmarked van they were picked up in. Or they could have used some cover, like climbing in and out of a manhole in monkey suits. Even a vendor’s cart. New York City is 40 percent foreign born. If you can’t disguise yourself in that thicket of humanity, where can you? The van pickup didn’t make sense either. Why not just break off on foot?

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