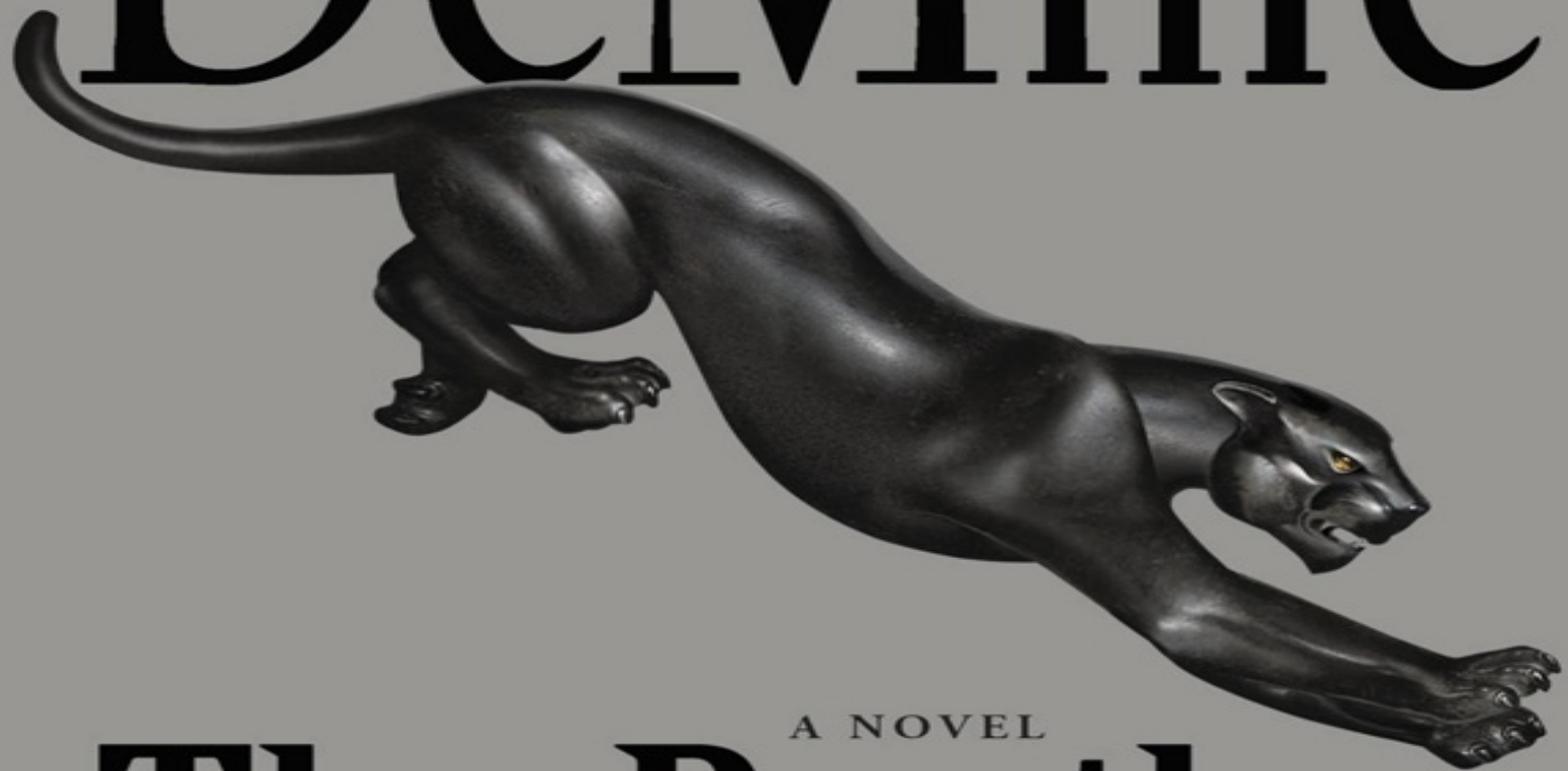


#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLER

Nelson DeMille



A NOVEL

The Panther

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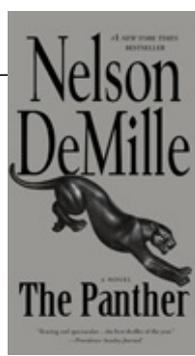
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The Panther

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Author's Note

Regarding the spelling of Arabic words in this novel, I've used a variety of sources in transliterating. There is no standard transliteration of Arabic script into American English, and in some cases I simply used phonetic spelling to make it easy for the reader. I mention this up front with the hope that I can persuade the reader not to send me an e-mail saying I spelled an Arabic word wrong. However, if you see an English word misspelled, let me know.

PART I

Marib, Yemen



CHAPTER ONE

A man wearing the white robes of a Bedouin, Bulus ibn al-Darwish by name, known also by his Al Qaeda nom de guerre as al-Numair—The Panther—stood to the side of the Belgian tour group.

The Belgians had arrived in a minibus from Sana'a, four men and five women, with their Yemeni driver, and their Yemeni tour guide, a man named Wasim al-Rahib. The driver had stayed in the air conditioned minibus, out of the hot August sun.

The tour guide, Wasim, spoke no French, but his English was good, and one of the Belgians, Annette, a girl of about sixteen, also spoke English and was able to translate into French for her compatriots.

Wasim said to his group, "This is the famous Bar'an Temple, also known as Arsh Bilqis—the throne of the Queen of Sheba."

Annette translated, and the tour group nodded and began taking pictures.

Al-Numair, The Panther, scanned the ruins of the temple complex—over an acre of brown sandstone walls, towering square columns, and open courtyards, baking in the desert sun. American and European archaeologists had spent many years and much money uncovering and restoring the pagan ruins—and then they had left because of tribal suspicion, and more recently Al Qaeda activities. Such a waste of time and money, thought The Panther. He looked forward to the day when the Western tourists stopped coming and this temple and the surrounding pagan ruins returned to the shifting desert sands.

The Panther looked beyond the temple complex at the sparse vegetation and the occasional date palm. In ancient times, he knew, it was much greener here, and more populous. Now the desert had arrived from the East—from the Hadhramawt, meaning the Place Where Death Comes.

Wasim al-Rahib glanced at the tall, bearded Bedouin and wondered why he had joined the Belgian tour group. Wasim had made his arrangements with the local tribal sheik, Musa, paying the man one hundred American dollars for the privilege of visiting this national historic site. Also, of course, the money bought peace; the promise that no Bedouin tribesmen would annoy, hinder, or in any way molest the tour group. So, Wasim wondered, why was this Bedouin here?

The Panther noticed that the tour guide was looking at him and he returned the stare until the guide turned back to his group.

There were no other tourists at the temple today; only one or two groups each week ventured out from the capital of Sana'a, two hundred kilometers to the west. The Panther remembered when the famous ruins attracted more Westerners, but unfortunately because of the recent reports of Al Qaeda activity in this province of Marib, many tourists stayed away. He smiled.

Also because of this situation, the Belgians had arrived with an armed escort of twenty men from

the National Security Bureau, a para-military police force, whose job it was to protect tourists on the roads and at historic sites. The tourists paid for this service, which was money well spent, thought The Panther. But unfortunately for these Westerners, the policemen had also been paid to leave, which they were about to do.

Wasim continued his talk. "This temple is also known as the Moon Temple, and it was dedicated to the national god of the Sabaeen state, who was called Almaqah."

As the Belgian girl translated, Wasim glanced again at the bearded man in Bedouin robes who was standing too close to his tour group. He wanted to say something to the man, but he was uneasy about him, and instead he said to his group, "This was one thousand and five hundred years before the Prophet Mohammed enlightened the world and vanquished the pagans."

The Panther, who also spoke English, nodded in approval at the guide's last statement.

He studied the Belgian tourists. There were two couples in their later years who seemed to know one another, and who looked uncomfortable in the burning sun. There was also a man and a woman, perhaps in their early twenties, and The Panther saw they wore no wedding rings, though they were obviously together, sometimes holding hands. The remaining man and woman were also together as a couple, and the girl who was translating appeared to be their daughter or a relative. He noted, too, that the women had covered their hair with hijabs, a sign of respect for Islamic custom, but none of them had covered their faces as required. The guide should have insisted, but he was a servant of the non-believers.

They were all adventurous travelers, thought The Panther. Curious people, perhaps prosperous, enjoying their excursion from Sana'a, where, as he knew, they were guests of the Sheraton Hotel. Perhaps, though, this excursion was more difficult and adventurous than they had been told by the tour company. So now, he imagined, they might be thinking about their hotel comforts, and the hotel bar and dining room. He wondered, too, if a few of them were also thinking about security matters. That would be an appropriate thought.

Again Wasim stole a glance at the Bedouin, who had intruded even closer to his small tour group. The man, he thought, was not yet forty years of age, though the beard and the sun-browned skin made him appear older. Wasim also noticed now that the man was wearing the ceremonial jambiyah—the curved dagger of Yemen, worn by all males in the north of the country. The man's shiwal, his head covering, was not elaborate nor was it embroidered with costly gold thread, so this was not an important man, not a tribal sheik or the chief of a clan. Perhaps, then, the Bedouin was there to ask for alms from the Westerners. Even though Wasim had paid Sheik Musa to keep the tribesmen at a distance, if this Bedouin asked for alms, Wasim would give him a few hundred rials and tell him to go in peace.

Wasim again addressed his group. "This temple is believed by some who practice the American Mormon faith to be the place to which the Mormon prophet called Lehi fled from Jerusalem in the sixth century before the Common Era. It was here, according to Mormon scholars, where Lehi buried the prophet Ishmael. And when this was done, Lehi built a great ship for himself and his family and sailed to America."

Annette translated, and one of the male tourists asked a question, which the young girl translated into English for Wasim, who smiled and answered, "Yes, as you can see, there is no ocean here. But in ancient times, it is believed there was much water here—rivers, perhaps—from the Great Flood of Noah."

The young woman translated, and the Belgians all nodded in understanding.

Wasim said, "Follow me, please." He ascended fourteen stone steps and stood before six square

columns, five of which rose twenty meters in height, while the sixth was broken in half. He waited for his group to join him, then said, “If you look there to the west, you will see the mountains where the local tribes believe the Ark of Noah came to rest.”

The tourists took pictures of the distant mountains and didn't notice the bearded man climbing the steps toward them.

Wasim, however, did notice, and he said to the Bedouin in Arabic, “Please, sir, this is a private tourist group.”

Al-Numair, The Panther, replied in Arabic, “But I wish to learn also.”

Wasim, keeping a respectful tone in his voice, replied to the Bedouin, “You speak no English or French, sir. What can you learn?”

The Panther replied in English, “I am a poor man, sir, who comes to entertain the tourists in my finest tribal robes.”

Wasim was taken aback by the man's perfect English, then replied in Arabic, “Thank you, but Sheik Musa has assured me—”

“Please, sir,” said the Bedouin in English, “allow me to pose for photographs with your Western friends. One hundred rials for each photograph.”

Annette heard this and translated into French for her compatriots, who had seemed anxious about the exchange between the two Arabs. Hearing now what this was about, they all smiled and agreed that this would be a very good thing—an excellent souvenir photograph to take home.

Wasim acquiesced to his clients' wishes and motioned to the Bedouin to proceed.

The Belgians began posing alongside the tall, bearded Bedouin, individually at first, then in small groups. The Bedouin smiled for each photograph, and he was very accommodating to the tourists as they asked him to move around the temple to set up various shots with the ruins in the background.

One of the older men asked him to draw his dagger, but the Bedouin explained almost apologetically that if the jambiyah is drawn, then it must be used. On hearing the translation of this from Annette, the older Belgian said to his compatriots, “Then we will not ask him to draw his dagger,” and they all laughed. But Wasim did not laugh.

Wasim glanced at his watch. Though they had left Sana'a at eight in the morning, the bus had not arrived at the nearby town of Marib until after noon. The tourists had lunched, too slowly he thought, at the Bilqis Hotel tourist restaurant, and there Wasim had to wait too long for Sheik Musa, who demanded two hundred American dollars, saying to Wasim, “The other tribes are making problems and so I must pay them to allow you safe passage on your return to Sana'a.”

Wasim had heard this before, but he explained to the sheik, as he always did, “The tourists have already paid a fixed price to the travel company in Sana'a, and a price for the police escort. I can ask no more of them. And there is no profit for me if I give you more money.” But, as always, Wasim promised, “Next time.”

The sheik and the tour guide from Sana'a had agreed on the one hundred dollars, but Wasim had decided there would be no next time. The road from Sana'a to Marib was becoming unsafe, and it was not only the tribes who were restless, but also this new group, Al Qaeda, who had entered the area in the last year. They were mostly foreigners—Saudis, Kuwaitis, people from neighboring Oman, and also Iraqis who had fled the Americans in their homeland. These people, Wasim thought, would bring death and unhappiness to Yemen.

In fact, Sheik Musa had said to Wasim, “These Al Qaeda people are becoming a problem. They are attracted by the American oil wells and the American pipelines, and they gather like wolves waiting for a chance to strike.” The sheik had also told Wasim, “You cannot buy those people, my friend, and

the police cannot protect you from them, but I can. Three hundred dollars.”

~~Again, Wasim had declined to make the extra payment, and Sheik Musa had shrugged and said, “Perhaps next time.”~~

“Yes, next time.” But Wasim was now sure there would be no next time.

Wasim al-Rahib, a university graduate with a degree in ancient history, could not find a job teaching, or a job anywhere, except with this tour company. It paid well enough, and the Western tourists were generous with their gratuities, but it was becoming dangerous work. And also dangerous for the tourists, though the tour company would not say that. All the guidebooks—written years ago—said, “You cannot leave Yemen without seeing the ruins of Marib.” Well, Wasim thought, they would have to see them without him.

Wasim watched the tourists, talking now to the Bedouin through the English translation of the young girl. The Bedouin seemed pleasant enough, but there was something unusual about him. He did not seem like a Bedouin. He was too at ease with these foreigners, and he spoke English. Very unusual, unless perhaps he worked for the Americans at the oil installation.

In any case, it was now past three in the afternoon, and they had not yet visited the Temple of the Sun. If they stayed here much longer, they would be traveling the last hour to Sana’a in darkness. And it was not good to be on the road after dark, even with the police escort, who themselves did not want to be on the road after dark.

Wasim spoke in English to the young woman, and to the Bedouin, “We must now leave. Thank you, sir, for your hospitality.”

But the Belgians wanted a photograph of the entire group together with the Bedouin, taken by Wasim. So Wasim, thinking about his gratuity, agreed, and took the photographs with four different cameras.

Wasim then said to the Belgian girl, “I think if you give this gentleman a thousand rials, he will be very happy.” He made sure she understood. “That will be about five euros. A very good day’s pay for this kind man.”

Annette collected the money and handed it to the Bedouin, then said to him, “Thank you, sir.”

The Bedouin took the money and replied, “You are very welcome.” He also said to the girl, “Please tell your compatriots that Bulus ibn al-Darwish wishes them a happy and safe visit to Yemen.”

Wasim was looking to the north where the minibus had parked on the road behind the army truck that carried the security police. The bus was still there, but the truck was not. In fact, Wasim could not see any of the National Security police in their distinctive blue camouflage uniforms.

Wasim made a call on his cell phone to the police commander, but there was no answer. Then he called the bus driver, Isa, who was also his wife’s cousin. But Isa did not answer his cell phone.

Wasim then looked at the Bedouin, who was looking at him, and Wasim understood what was happening. He took a deep breath to steady his voice and said to the Bedouin in Arabic, “Please, sir. . . .” Wasim shook his head and said, “This is a very bad thing.”

The tall Bedouin replied, “You, Wasim al-Rahib, are a bad thing. You are a servant of the infidels but you should be a servant of Allah.”

“I am truly his servant—”

“Quiet.” The Bedouin raised his right arm in a signal, then lowered it and looked at Wasim and the Belgians, but said nothing.

The four men and five women were looking at their guide, waiting for him to explain what was happening. Clearly, something was wrong, though a few minutes earlier everyone had been smiling and posing for pictures.

Wasim avoided the worried stares of his group.

Annette said to Wasim in English, "What is wrong? Did we not give him enough?"

Wasim did not reply, so Annette said to the Bedouin in English, "Is there something wrong?"

Al-Numair, The Panther, replied to her, "You are what is wrong."

The Belgians began asking Annette what had been said, but she didn't reply.

Then one of the men in the group shouted, "Regardez!" and pointed.

In the temple courtyard below, where they had been standing, a group of about twelve men suddenly appeared from the dark recesses of the ruins, wearing Bedouin robes and carrying Kalashnikov rifles.

At first, all the tourists were silent, but then as the Bedouin began running up the stone steps, a woman screamed.

Then everything happened very quickly. Two of the Bedouin pointed their rifles at the Belgians while the others bound their hands behind their backs with tape.

Annette shouted to Wasim, "What is happening? Why are they doing this?"

Wasim, whose wrists were also bound, was at first afraid to speak, but then he found his voice and said, "It is a kidnapping. Do not be frightened. They kidnap for money. They will not harm us."

And as Wasim said this, he hoped it was so. A tribal kidnapping of Westerners. It was a common thing—what was called a guest kidnapping—and they would spend a week, perhaps two, with a tribe until money was delivered. And then they would be released. These things usually ended well, he knew, and Westerners were rarely harmed, and never killed unless the army intervened and attempted to free those who were taken by the tribes.

Annette, though she was terrified, said to her compatriots, "It is a kidnapping. For ransom. Wasim says not to be—"

"Shut up," said the tall Bedouin in English. He then said to Wasim in Arabic, "This is not a kidnapping."

Wasim closed his eyes and began praying aloud.

Bulus ibn al-Darwish, The Panther, drew his curved dagger and moved behind Wasim. With one hand he pulled Wasim's head back by his hair, and with his other hand he drew his curved dagger across Wasim's throat, then shoved the man forward.

Wasim fell face first onto the stone floor of the Temple of the Moon and lay still as his blood flowed quickly and spread across the hot stones.

The Belgians stared in horror, then some of them began screaming and some began crying.

The armed men now forced all the Belgians to their knees, and The Panther moved first to Annette, coming around behind her, and said to her, "So you don't have to watch the others die," and with a quick motion he pulled her head back by her long hair and sliced open her throat with his curved dagger, then moved on to the others.

Some cried or begged for mercy, and some struggled, though it was futile, because the jihadists held them in a tight grip as The Panther cut their throats. A few accepted their fate quietly. Only one prayed, an elderly woman whom The Panther saved for last so she could finish her prayers. It was interesting, he thought, to see how people died.

In less than two minutes, it was over. All nine infidels and Wasim their servant lay on the floor of the temple, their life blood flowing freely onto the ancient stone.

Bulus ibn al-Darwish, al-Numair, The Panther, watched the infidels as, one by one, they went into their final death throes, then lay still.

One, however, the man who was the father of the young woman, suddenly stood, his wrists still

bound behind his back, and began running down the stone steps. He quickly stumbled and fell first onto the stone, then tumbled down the steep steps and came to rest at the bottom.

The Panther said to his jihadists, "I hope he was not injured."

The men laughed.

The Panther stared at his jambiyah, red with blood, then slid it into its sheath.

He retrieved one of the tourists' cameras and looked at the digital images on the small screen which made him smile.

He called to one of his men, "Nabeel," and handed him the camera to take pictures of the slaughter.

The Panther looked at the dead Europeans and said, "So, you came to Yemen for adventure and for knowledge. And you have found both. A great final adventure, and a great knowledge of this land. You have learned that in Yemen death comes."



PART II

New York City



CHAPTER TWO

If the earth had an anus, it would be located in Yemen.

And speaking of assholes, my boss, FBI Special Agent in Charge Tom Walsh, wanted to see me and John Corey, at 5:15 P.M., and Detective Corey was now five minutes late. But not to worry—my wife Kate Mayfield, who also works for Walsh, was on time for the meeting and had undoubtedly made excuses for me, like, “John is in a passive-aggressive mood today. He’ll be here when he feels he made his statement.”

Right. Another five minutes. I logged off my computer and looked around the empty cube farm. I work on the 26th floor of 26 Federal Plaza, which is located in Lower Manhattan in the shadows of the Twin Towers. Well... not anymore. The Towers, I mean. But I’m still here.

It was Friday—what we call Federal Friday—meaning that by 4:30, my colleagues in the war on terrorism, mostly FBI agents and NYPD detectives, had left to beat the bridge and tunnel traffic, or they’d gone off on special assignments to the surrounding bars and restaurants. With any luck, I’d be joining them shortly. But first I had to see Tom Walsh, who is in charge of the New York Anti-Terrorist Task Force. And what did Mr. Walsh want to see me about?

His e-mail had said: *John, Kate, my office, 5:15. Private. Subject Yemen.*

Yemen? Typo, maybe. *Yemex?* A new kind of explosive? Maybe he meant “Yes-men.” Too many yes-men in the organization.

Walsh doesn’t usually state the subject of a private meeting—he likes to surprise you. But when he does state a subject, he wants you to think about it—he wants it to eat at your guts.

If I thought this out, I could conclude that Tom Walsh wanted to assign Kate and me to the Yemen desk. Do we have a Yemen desk here? Maybe he just wanted us to help him find Yemen on the map.

Another possibility... no, he was *not* going to ask us to *go* to Yemen. No, no. I’d been there for a month to investigate the USS *Cole* bombing. That’s how I found out it was an anal cavity.

I stood, put on my jacket, straightened my tie, and brushed the chips off my shoulders—a well-balanced detective has a chip on *both* shoulders—then made my way toward Walsh’s office.

A brief history of this elite organization. The Anti-Terrorist Task Force was founded in 1980, when the word “terrorist” was not synonymous with Islamic terrorist. The ATTF in those days had its hands full with Irish Republican Army guys, Black Panthers, Puerto Rican separatist groups, and other bad actors who, to paraphrase William Shakespeare, thought that all New York was a stage, and every bad actor wanted to play Broadway.

So the first Federally funded Anti-Terrorist Task Force was formed here in New York, made up of ten FBI agents and ten NYPD detectives. Now we have a lot more people than that. Also, we’ve added a few CIA officers, plus people from other Federal and State law enforcement and intelligence

agencies. The actual number is classified, and if someone asks me how many people work here, I say "About half."

The New York Task Force experiment worked well, and prior to September 11, 2001, there were about thirty-five other anti-terrorist task forces across the country. Now, post-9/11, there are over a hundred nationwide. A sign of the times.

The theory behind these task forces is that if you mix people from various law enforcement and intelligence agencies into a single organization, you will get different skills and mind-sets coming together to form synergy, and that will lead to better results. It sort of works. I mean, my wife is FBI and I'm NYPD and we get along and communicate pretty well. In fact, everyone here would get along better if they slept with one another.

The other reason for including the local police in the Federal Task Force is that most FBI agents—my wife included—are from non-urban areas, meaning the 'burbs or the boondocks. So in a big city like New York, it's the local cops who know the territory. I've instructed new FBI agents on how to read a subway map and I've pinpointed for them the location of every Irish pub on Second and Third Avenues.

In any case, I'm actually a contract agent here, meaning I'm a civilian. Until five years ago I was NYPD, but I'm retired on medical disability as a result of being shot three times in the line of duty, all on the same day. I'm fine physically (mentally maybe not so fine), but there were other reasons I didn't take the offer to retire. Now, like a lot of ex-cops, I've found a new career with the Feds, who have billions of anti-terrorist dollars to spend. Do I like this job? I was about to find out.



CHAPTER THREE

My boss and my wife were sitting at a round table near a big window that faced south with a good view of Lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty in the harbor; a view now unobstructed by the Twin Towers, though on the window was a black decal of the missing buildings with the words “Never Forget.”

No one, myself included, commented on my lateness, and I took a seat at the table.

I am not overly fond of Mr. Walsh, but I respect the job he does, and I appreciate the stress he puts me under. I’d like to think I make his job easier, but... well, I don’t. I have, however, covered his butt on occasion and made him look good. He does the same for me now and then. It’s a trade-off for Tom. So why did he want to send me to Yemen?

Tom informed me, “Kate and I haven’t discussed the subject of my memo.”

“Good.” Bullshit.

Kate is career FBI, which is maybe why she likes the boss. Or maybe she just likes him, which is maybe why I don’t.

A quick word about Special Agent in Charge Tom Walsh. He’s young for the job—mid-forties—good-looking if you like store mannequins, never married, but in a long-term relationship with a woman who is as self-absorbed and narcissistic as he is. Did that come out right?

As for his management style, he’s somewhat aloof with his own FBI agents, and he’s borderlinely condescending to the NYPD detectives under his command. He demands total loyalty, but he has forgotten that the essence of loyalty is reciprocity. Tom is loyal to his superiors in Washington, but everyone else is expendable. I never forget that when I deal directly with him. Like now.

But human beings are very complex, and I’ve seen a better side of Tom Walsh. As a for-instance in our last major case, involving the Libyan terrorist Asad Khalil, a.k.a. The Lion, Walsh exhibited a degree of physical bravery that matched anything I’ve seen in my twenty years with the NYPD and nearly four years with the Task Force. If it wasn’t for that one act of incredible courage, when he put his life on the line to save thousands of innocent lives, I’d now be thinking about another job when my contract expires next month.

Tom got right to the point and said, “Let me get right to the point.” He glanced at an e-mail in front of him and informed us, “Two overseas postings have come down from Washington.”

I inquired, “Paris and Rome?”

“No,” he replied, “two jobs in Sana’a.” He reminded me, “That’s the capital of Yemen.”

“Not happening,” I assured him.

“Hear me out.”

Kate said to Tom, “If my husband is not interested, then I’m not interested.”

Actually, she didn't say that. She said to me, "Let's hear this."

~~Thanks, partner. Kate is always putting career and country ahead of her husband. Well, not always~~
But often. I have notes on this.

Also, my detective instincts told me that Tom and Kate had, in fact, started without me. FBI people stick together.

Walsh continued, "One posting is for a legat, and the other is for an ERT person." He added, "Both in Sana'a, but with some duties in Aden." He informed us, "The Sana'a embassy currently has no Legal Affairs Office, so this is a new position, beginning next month."

He then went into an official job description, reading from a piece of paper. I tuned out.

A legat, FYI, is a legal attaché, attached to the U.S. Embassy in a foreign capital, or to a U.S. consulate office in a major city. In this case, it would be Sana'a and maybe Aden, the only two cities in Yemen as far as I knew.

Kate, like many FBI Special Agents, is a lawyer, so I, as a detective, concluded that the legal job was hers. The ERT is the Evidence Response Team—the Fed equivalent of forensic or crime scene investigator—so I concluded that that was to be my job.

The crime in question, I was certain, was the bombing of the USS *Cole*, a warship that had been refueling in Aden Harbor. This took place on October 12, 2000, which was why I had been in Yemen in August 2001. The investigation of this terrorist act is ongoing and will continue until everyone involved is brought to justice.

As for Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, the word in Arabic means A'nus. And by the way, the port city of Aden is no treat either. Trust me on this.

Mr. Walsh continued, "As John knows from his last visit, the Yemeni government will issue only forty-five-day visas to our ERT personnel who are investigating the *Cole* bombing. But with some pressure, we can usually get this extended for up to a year."

A year? Are you kidding?

Walsh editorialized, "The Yemenis are being cooperative, but not *fully* cooperative." He explained, "They're walking a fine line between pressure from Washington and pressure from sources inside and outside of Yemen who want the Americans out of their country." He further explained, "The government in Sana'a is currently going through an anti-American phase."

I informed him, "I don't think it's a phase, Tom." I suggested, "Maybe we should stay home and nuke them."

Tom ignored my suggestion and continued, "Kate's job with the embassy comes under diplomatic rules, so she can be there for any reasonable length of time."

How about five minutes? Does that work?

Tom further briefed us, "Bottom line, you can both figure on a year." He added, "Together." He smiled and said, "That's not so bad."

"It's wonderful," I agreed. I reminded him, however, "We're not going."

"Let me finish."

This is where the boss tells you what's going to happen if you say no, and Tom said, "Kate's time here in New York is approaching a natural conclusion in regard to her career trajectory. In fact, Task Force headquarters in Washington would like her to transfer there. It would be a good career move."

Kate, who is from someplace called Minnesota, did not originally like New York, but she's grown fond of being here with me. So why wasn't she saying that?

Tom continued, "If Kate accepts this overseas hardship assignment, the Office of Preference will move her to the top of the OP list." He explained, unnecessarily, "Meaning, after Yemen, she can

return to New York—or any place she chooses.”

Kate nodded.

Tom said to me, “If you accept this assignment, your contract, which I understand is about to terminate, will obviously be renewed for the time you’re in Yemen, and we’ll add two years afterwards.”

I guess that was the carrot. I think I liked the stick better—don’t renew my contract.

Tom had obviously thought about that, too, and said to me, “Or, after your return from Yemen, you can have a Federally funded job with the NYPD Intelligence Unit.” He assured me, “We’ll take care of that.”

I glanced out the window. A crappy February day. It was sunny in Yemen. I looked at the nearby brick tower of One Police Plaza. It would be nice to be back on the force, even as a Federal employee, though I’d be working in intelligence rather than homicide. Still, I’d be out of 26 Federal Plaza, which would make me and Tom equally happy. Kate and I could fly paper airplanes to each other from our office windows.

Tom seemed to be done with the carrot and the stick, so I asked the obvious question. “Why us?”

He had a ready answer and replied, “You’re the best qualified.” He reminded me, “You’ve already been there, and the team in Yemen would appreciate someone with experience.”

I didn’t reply.

He went on, “You two work well as a team, and the thinking is that a husband and wife might fit in better.”

“I’m losing you, Tom.”

“Well... as you know, women are not fully accepted in some Islamic countries. And professional women and unmarried women run into many obstacles. But Kate, as a married woman traveling with her husband, can move about more freely.” He added, “And more safely.”

Neither Kate nor I responded to that, but I was getting the feeling that he wasn’t talking about Kate’s work as a legal attaché at the embassy.

In fact, Kate asked, “What’s this about, Tom?”

He didn’t reply directly, but said, “You both may be asked to go beyond your official job descriptions.”

I inquired, “Do we have to kill somebody?”

He didn’t laugh and say, “Of course not, you silly man.” In fact, he didn’t say anything, which said a lot.

Tom stood and went to the sideboard. He returned with three glasses and a bottle of medicinal brandy. He poured, we clinked, said “Cheers,” and drank.

He turned and stared out the window awhile, then said, as if to himself, “There were seventeen American sailors killed—murdered—when a boat pulled up beside the Cole in Aden Harbor and the suicide bombers on board detonated a large explosive device that blew a hole in the side of our warship. Thirty-nine sailors were injured, some very badly.” He added, “A multi-million-dollar warship was put out of service for nearly two years.”

Right. That was almost three and a half years ago, and the ongoing investigation has had mixed results.

The Evidence Response Team in Yemen, by the way, has long ago discovered any existing forensic evidence, and the crime scene—Aden Harbor—has been dredged, and the USS *Cole* is repaired and returned to duty. So this is an Evidence Response Team in name only—a designation that our reluctant Yemeni allies can live with. In fact, the ERT team in Yemen interrogates suspects, witnesses, and

informants, and is actively involved in hunting down the perpetrators. That's what I did when I was there. So maybe that's what Tom meant about us going beyond our job descriptions. Or... he meant something else.

Walsh sat, then confided to us, "We have identified one of the masterminds of the attack, and we have good intelligence that this individual is now back in Yemen." He added, "The focus of our team in Yemen is to find and apprehend this man." He looked at Kate and me and said, "You would be part of that effort."

Neither of us replied, so Walsh continued, "This assignment could take you out of Sana'a and out of Aden and into the tribal lands."

I thought about that. The tribal lands, otherwise known to the Americans there as the Badlands, or Indian Territory, were basically lawless. Also known as dangerous.

Walsh said to us, "As John knows, this could be risky."

Right. Now I knew the answer to "Why us?" Walsh wanted me dead. But he liked Kate. So maybe I would be the only one riding a camel into the Badlands, looking for this guy.

I pointed out to Walsh, "You're not making this job sound very attractive."

He replied, "I'm not going to sugarcoat it."

"Right. I appreciate that, Tom. But I just don't see what's in this for us."

"Why is it always about you?"

Well, that made me feel bad. Tom knows how to do that. So I said, "Look, Tom, I'm a patriot, a soldier in the war on terrorism, and I've never backed away from my duty or from danger—"

"I know that. Both of you are brave, dedicated—"

"Right. But I sort of like my danger in an urban setting. Like here." I reminded him, "I've been there. We slept with our boots on and our guns in our hands." I assured him, "I'm not thinking of my own safety. I'm thinking of Kate."

Kate, of course, said, "I can take care of myself, John."

"Right." *You go.*

Walsh told us, "You would need to report to the American Embassy in Sana'a no later than next weekend. So I'll need your answer Monday at nine." He added, "If you say yes, then I can give you the classified details of your assignment. Once you have those classified details, you are committed to the assignment."

"In other words, we don't know what we're saying yes to until after we say yes."

"Correct." He assured us, "If you say no, there will be no record of this meeting and no adverse entry in your file." He reminded us, "Your careers will take a normal course."

Right. I'd be unemployed in New York, and Kate would be in Washington.

Walsh continued, "This assignment—if you choose to accept it—will ensure your futures—"

"Shorten our futures?"

He ignored me and continued, "Even if this mission is not successful. If successful, you and the other members of the team who are already in Yemen will be appropriately honored by a grateful government. That's all I can say about that."

Honored where? Arlington National Cemetery?

He had some good news. "Your assignment in Yemen would actually be over as soon as you apprehend this man."

Good incentive to wrap it up in a week. The other side of that deal is that our assignment could be over if this guy found us first.

Tom looked at me and said, "This assignment will give you ample opportunity to demonstrate your

sometimes unorthodox methods, which are not always appreciated here, but will be invaluable over there.”

How should I take that? Loose cannon makes good in Sandland?

Kate said, “We’ll think about it.” Then she asked Tom, “Can only one of us say yes?”

He nodded.

Well, I was seeing the old handwriting on the wall here. What did I do with my desert duds from my last trip to Sandy Arabia?

Tom stood and we also stood. He said, “I’ll see you both here in my office, Monday, nine A.M. Have a good weekend.”

We shook, and Kate and I left.

On the way back to our cube farm, I suggested, “Let’s get a drink.”

She didn’t reply immediately, then said to me, “John, we have to do this.”

“Absolutely, and we’ll have dinner, too. Where would you like to go?”

“We have to go to Yemen.”

“Why not Ecco’s?”

“I’m going.”

“Good. Should I call ahead for a table?”

“And I’d like you to go with me.”

“I wouldn’t let you drink alone.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“No.”

We grabbed our coats, rode down in the elevator, and exited the lobby of 26 Federal Plaza onto lower Broadway.

It was windy and cold on the street, but I like the cold. Good drinking weather. Yemen was hot and alcohol was illegal.

On the plus side, I could, as Tom said, and as I had discovered myself in Yemen, be free of the bureaucratic bullshit here, and free of the political correctness that permeated 26 Federal Plaza. I could be me. Nuts.

Also... I had the feeling that someone in Sandland needed to be whacked. That could be interesting. I mean, I never had or wanted a license to kill—but I could conceive of a situation where this might be necessary and right. Especially since 9/11.

This was a lot to think about, and I think better at the bar.

We got to Ecco’s on Chambers Street, and as we made our way to the crowded bar, Kate said to me, “We’re getting into a rut here. I’m ready for a change. An adventure.”

“Let’s go to a different bar.”

“We’ll appreciate our lives and jobs more when we come back.”

“Right.” But not everyone who went to Yemen came back.



CHAPTER FOUR

Ecco's is an Italian restaurant, but the bar is sort of old New York, though the prices are new New York.

The place was hopping on this cold Friday night after work, and most of the clientele were lawyer-judges, police officials, and politicians whose wallets hadn't seen the light of day in years.

Kate and I found a place at the bar, said hello to a few people we knew, and ordered the usual—Dewar's and soda for me, a Pinot Grigio for the lady.

Kate asked me, "Are there any places in Sana'a or Aden where you can get a drink?"

"Is that all you think about?"

My ex, Robin by name, is a high-priced criminal defense attorney, and she introduced me to the place years ago, and she still comes here. I don't care, and I don't dislike her, but I don't like her life work, which is defending the scumbags I spent twenty years trying to put in jail. That caused some strain on the short marriage. Now I'm married to another lawyer. As I often say, I like to screw lawyers.

Kate and I clinked and said grace. "Thank God it's Friday." There was a piano in the corner, and the player was just getting started. I said to Kate, "Ask him to play 'Midnight at the Oasis.' "

She rolled her big baby blues.

A word about Kate Mayfield, a.k.a. Kate Corey. We met on the job when we were both working on the first Asad Khalil case. FBI and NYPD are different species, but we fell in love, married—about four years ago—and it's still heaven.

Kate is a little younger than me—actually, about fourteen years—and the age difference is not a big issue; she's mature beyond her years, and I can't seem to grow up.

She's originally from Minnesota, as I said, and her father is retired FBI and her mother is a lobbyist. They both hate me, of course, but being from Minnesota they're really nice about it.

Also on the plus side, Kate and I have been shot at together, which is good for any relationship, and she's cool under fire. If she has any faults, aside from her divided loyalty, it's that she doesn't fully appreciate my NYPD work habits or methods. Also, the Feds are almost humorless, while cops are always funny. I'm trying to get more serious, and Kate is trying to see the funny side of terrorists.

Away from the job, we get along well. I wondered, though, how we'd do in Yemen, where we'd be on the job together 24/7. Maybe she'd appreciate my cowboy style better in a place where the only law is a man with a gun. Better yet, maybe we'd never find out.

I asked for a table and was happy to learn it would be a thirty-minute wait. "Another round," I said to the bartender. Can't walk on one leg.

Kate said to me, "If we don't take this assignment, your contract may not be renewed, and I ma

wind up in Washington.”

“He’s bluffing.”

“He’s not.”

“I don’t respond well to threats,” I assured her.

“It’s not a threat. It’s a transfer.”

“Whatever.”

“Would you live in Washington?”

“I’d rather live in Yemen.”

“Good. We’ll be together. In a year, we’ll be back in New York.”

“Right. It’s that year in Yemen that might be a career killer.”

She didn’t reply.

Regarding my last visit to Yemen in August 2001, the same month I was there, Kate was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, as a legat investigating the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing, which was an Al Qaeda attack, planned by Osama bin Laden, whose name was then unknown to most of the American public. A short time after Kate and I returned from our respective overseas assignments, Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda both became famous for murdering three thousand people.

Our separate assignments overseas, by the way, were a sort of punishment—or a warning—resulting from my and Kate’s unauthorized snooping into the mysterious midair explosion of TWA Flight 800. So off we went. Kate to Dar es Salaam, which was not such a bad place to be, and me to Yemen, which is like the Siberia of the Task Force, though I did feel like I was doing something useful. We returned to New York a few days apart, as I said, just in time for September 11. Tom Walsh was not the boss then, so I can’t say he was now making another effort at adjusting my attitude. So what was he up to? Kate was taking this at face value. I was not. Tom doesn’t do things *for* people; he does things *to* people. Also, this came from higher up. John Corey has to go to Yemen. But why?

Anyway, all this was running through my mind as I stood at the bar in Ecco’s, observing Western civilization at its best or worst, thinking about my career, my marriage, my country, my life, and my future.

I normally don’t reflect on any of this, and I pride myself on a low level of introspection and zero self-awareness. But I’d just been unexpectedly presented with a life-changing choice, and I needed to think about my response.

Kate asked me, “What are you thinking about?”

“There’s a new Monet exhibit at the Met.”

She looked doubtful, then said, “John... if you don’t want to go, I will understand.”

I said to her, “You should take my word that this is not a place you want to be for a year.”

She reminded me, “A lot of our people are or were there. And we have troops in places like Iraq and Afghanistan who are making great sacrifices every day.” She informed me, “You can’t pick where you want to fight a war. You have to go where the enemy is.”

“They’re *here*, Kate,” I reminded her. “We’re manning the ramparts of Fortress America.”

She thought about that, then said, “We’ve done a good job here. But now we need to go into the belly of the beast.”

“The asshole,” I corrected.

Our table was ready, and as we made our way through the restaurant, who should I see but my ex sitting with yet another beau. I mean, this lady has had more mounts than a Pony Express rider.

She saw me and waved, so I went to her table and said hello and got introduced to Mr. Right Now, who looked like he was about halfway through a sex change operation.

Kate, who is cool about this, said hello to Robin and her date, and Robin asked us, “How’s the war on terrorism going?”

I informed her, “The alert level is still yellow.”

Robin didn’t respond to that, but said, “God, sometimes I think they’re going to blow this place up.”

Kate had a nice comeback and said, “Why would anyone want to kill lawyers, judges, and politicians?”

Robin wasn’t sure how to take that and asked me, “Are you still in the apartment?”

The apartment in question is the former marital residence, a very expensive place on East 72nd Street that Robin had lived in when I met her. She’d signed over the long-term lease to me on her way out, a very nice gesture that took care of most of my monthly income. I said, “Still there.”

“Good. I wanted to send you both an invitation for a fund-raiser I’m running. It’s for the Downtown Association for the Arts.” She explained, “To raise money to commission artists to create murals and sculpture in Lower Manhattan.”

More shit.

“It’s at the downtown Ritz-Carlton. Black tie. March twenty-sixth. You’ll be my guests.”

I found myself saying, “Thanks, but we’ll be out of the country.”

“Where are you going?”

“Classified.”

“Oh... well... good luck.”

“Thanks.”

We followed the hostess to our table, and Kate asked me, “Does that mean you’d rather go to Yemen with me than a black-tie fund-raiser with your ex-wife?”

“You know I’d follow you to hell.”

“Good. We leave next week.”



CHAPTER FIVE

It was Saturday, and Kate and I agreed not to discuss Yemen until Sunday evening.

Kate went to the office Saturday morning to clean up some paperwork and to identify cases that she would need to hand off if, in fact, she was going to Yemen.

I had an appointment with a guy named Nabeel, who coincidentally was from Yemen. I didn't know Nabeel, but he'd called the ATTF office, using only his first name, asking for me by my full name, and saying to me that we had a mutual friend. I doubt that, but that's how I get half of my contacts in the Muslim community; my business card is all over town. Well, Muslim neighborhood. It pays to advertise.

My brief phone conversation with Nabeel revealed that his legal status in the country was a little shaky, and he wanted some help with that in exchange for some information he had. Nabeel worked at a delicatessen in Brooklyn, so I wasn't sure what kind of information he had for me. Phoney baloney. Exploding beans?

A little-known factoid is that many Yemeni immigrants work in delis in Brooklyn and Queens. Why? Who knows? Why do the Turks own so many gas stations? Why do Indians own all the 'Elevens? Who cares as long as the Irish still run the pubs?

Anyway, I told Nabeel to meet me in Ben's Kosher Deli on West 38th Street, a place unlikely to be frequented by others of the Islamic faith—though, ironically, kosher food is halal, meaning okay for Muslims, so this works.

And here I was now in Ben's, sitting in a booth across from Nabeel. He had to get back to his deli in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, so this was going to be a happily short meeting.

Nabeel looked to be about mid-thirties, but he was probably younger, with a scruffy beard, dark skin, and teeth stained green by khat—a narcotic leaf that keeps ninety percent of the male population of Yemen perpetually stoned and happy. I wished I had some now.

Nabeel ordered tea and a bagel with hummus, and I had coffee.

I asked Nabeel, "Where did you get my name?"

"I tell you on phone. From friend." He also reminded me, "Can not tell you friend."

"Was it Abdul?"

"Who Abdul?"

"Which Abdul. Who's on first?"

"Sir?"

"Talk."

Nabeel talked. "There is big plot from peoples of Al Qaeda. Saudi peoples. No Yemen. All Saudi. Plot is to make bomb exploding in New York."

“Can you be a little more specific?” And maybe grammatical?

“Yes? What more?”

“Bomb where? When? Who?”

“I have all information. I give you. I need work visa.”

Maybe I could give him my visa to Yemen. I asked him, “You have ID on you? Passport?”

“No.”

They never do. I really didn't want to speak to this guy unless I could see his passport, so I said to him, “I need you to come to my office.” I took a card from my pocket and asked him, “What's your last name?”

He gave me a scrap of paper on which his name was written in badly formed Latin letters—Nabeel al-Samad—saying to me, “I copy this from passport.” He said proudly, “I can sign name.”

“Wonderful.” I wrote on the back of my business card, *Nabeel al-Samad to see Det. Corey*. I signed it, dated it, and handed it to him, saying, “I'll have an Arabic translator and I'll have someone from Immigration for you to talk to. Capisce?”

“Yes? You arrest me in office?”

“No. I can arrest you here.” And fuck up my day. Not to mention yours.

“Talk here first.”

“Okay. Talk.”

Nabeel confided that he was in contact with people who knew more about this bomb plot, but he needed more time—like a six-month visa—to get the details. Sounded like bullshit. But you never know.

Finally, he agreed to come into the office on Monday if he could get the morning off. These guys work twelve-hour days, six or seven days a week, and they send what amounts to a fortune home to their wife and ten kids. A deli in Brooklyn is like a gold mine in Yemen.

I asked him, “Where you from in Yemen?”

He named some place that sounded like “Ali Baba.”

“You like it there?”

“Yes. Beautiful country. Good people.”

“Then why do you want to stay here?”

“No work in Yemen. I go home, two months. Three months. See family. Come again here. Go again to Yemen.”

A Yemeni jet-setter. I tore a sheet out of my notebook, gave it to him with a pen, and said, “Write your info.”

Unfortunately, he couldn't write English beyond his name, so I said, “In Arabic.” No luck. Illiterate in two languages. “Spanish?”

“Sir?”

Three languages. I asked him the name of his deli in Brooklyn, his place of residence, and his cell phone number.

He spoke—slowly, please—and I wrote in my notebook, saying to him, “I want to see you Monday morning at 26 Federal Plaza or I'll send a police car to pick you up. Have your passport with you. And your visa—expired or not. They'll have your name at security. Bring my card. Understand?”

He nodded.

I dialed the cell number he'd given me and it rang in his pocket. Trust, but verify. I threw a twenty on the table and left.

I was supposed to meet Kate at the Met to see the stupid Monet exhibit. I should learn to keep my

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