

Tariq Houmaz hurried down 86th Street toward Broadway, glancing over his shoulder from time to time. The day ebbed cooler and it felt good to walk. Restaurant aromas seeped through the humid air and muted pinks and blues filled the sky at dusk. The streets were crowded with people seeking a place to eat. It was the perfect time of day for him to avoid detection.

The safe house was three blocks south, next door to a Chinese restaurant. Incessant traffic noise blared, making it more difficult for him to detect the coverts he'd noticed before. He thought, *counter-surveillance is a two-way street*.

The envelope in the right-inside pocket of his brown-tweed sport jacket contained funds-transfer forms and a list of the bank codes he'd obtained earlier that day at Bank of Trade. Tomorrow, he'd return the forms and send his money on its way to the Vladivostok branch of the Bank of Trade. In four days he'd meet up with the cash in Vladivostok. What a pisshole of a city. He'd make his stay as short as possible.

The left-inside pocket of his jacket contained a snubnose Heckler & Koch and the outside pocket contained an extra clip, both purchased from a gun dealer known for supplying local gangbangers and pushers in East Harlem.

His eyes sparked in anger with the memory of the day his father had changed everything, taking him from a well-to-do college student to a penniless beggar. A time so long ago when he'd studied to become a petrochemical engineer. All he'd wanted then was to work for his father at ArabOil Corporation headquartered in Riyadh. But the "accident" at the refinery where he'd apprenticed had left him without his family.

He knew for a fact it had been no accident. He'd hidden in a lifeboat and watched, peeking from under its canvas cover as Navy SEALs destroyed the refinery's rig, trying

to eliminate someone the United States thought might be a terrorist conduit. “Collateral damage,” the American diplomats claimed. They’d murdered thirty-seven innocent men and women. No one told him if the terrorist they were hunting had been executed or had escaped. Or even if there had been any terrorist.

But Houmaz’s father hadn’t believed him. The old man blamed him. Disowned him. His father insisted that Tariq should have fought the invaders instead of hiding until the fighters had finished their work and left the rig.

Without a home, and separated from his brothers and his father, he’d drifted until the obvious occurred to him. He wouldn’t run ArabOil. But there were other uses for an engineer’s skills.

As dusk deepened, the rosy sky lit 84th street. He walked from shade to shade, avoiding anyone out for an evening stroll. A cooling breeze rolled down the street, blowing his hair and clothes. It felt good. He turned off Broadway onto 83rd Street.

After doubling back twice to ensure he wasn’t being followed, he saw someone he’d seen before. Before he saw the face, it was the clothes that drew him. Then he noticed a few more of them. All wore college tee-shirts, but they seemed a bit old for college.

Their heads twisted from side to side, scanning the alleyways they passed. That kind of behavior was a signal that he was being surveilled by trained operatives. Were they armed? *Of course they are.* He wondered if the tee-shirts were treated with Liquid Armor. *Of course they are.* They walked close enough to be a group. Five of them, including a woman. And then he saw the face of the man who’d been following him earlier today. Definite trouble.

As the sky faded into darkness, Houmaz sought refuge, a place where he'd have a line-of-sight advantage with no choke point. He entered a West End restaurant, the Sichuan Gourmet.

He scanned the restaurant's large room and walked to the back exit. Here, he turned and faced the entrance. Fear spiked in him. He smiled. *Love that feeling.*

Two males neared the entrance; one was the man who he'd seen before. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket, wondering if the safe house was close enough to send him backup or an exfiltration team. The call on his cell took a few seconds.

The aroma of Asian cooking was at odds with his expectation of the blood and cordite odors soon to follow.

By now, some must have positioned themselves down the street and others by the rear exit to the alleyway.

He drew his gun. *I won't get out of this unless it is Allah's will.* The clip was full. *Thirteen rounds. Every shot will have to be a headshot.*

\* \* \*

Yakov cursed in Hebrew. "Our plan just changed. No way to do anything silently. He knows we're here. No way to get him to come out. We'll have to go in. Try to wound him so we can still complete his interrogation."

Jon didn't need mathematics to know this was even more desperate and crazy than a public beach burial. Their van was parked several blocks away and Jon hadn't any idea how they could carry a wounded captive so far. He was sure shots fired in an upscale

residential neighborhood would attract swift police attention. He even doubted they could execute Houmaz without having a dozen witnesses make their descriptions public. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Mother said to keep the operation quiet.”

Yakov’s rage sat on his face, bright red, and his fists clenched. “My operation. You follow my orders. Jon and Axel, cover the rear exit until I tell you to enter. Then, go in with a shooter’s stance. Shimon and I will enter from the front. Rimora, backstop the operation. The alleyway across the street. Go now.”

Jon’s pounding heartbeat pinned him near the wall. He stood in the alleyway with Axel, adjacent the rear exit of the restaurant. His palms were sweaty and his head was filled with anticipation of revenge for Lisa’s murder.

They used a large garbage bin as cover, and the overpowering stench of rotting food drove Jon to move as soon as possible. He heard Yakov’s voice in his ear bud. “Status?”

Jon replied. “Axel and I are outside the back exit. When can we send him to a better world?” He kept his voice as cool as ice.

Jon could see across the street to the alleyway where Rimora stood in the shadow of a building. Her role was the safety in case something went wrong and Houmaz managed to get by the four in the assassination squad.

Jon clenched his eyes shut for just a second. This was his first black op. His first time killing a person. He and Yakov were the only trained assassins in the team. The *bodel* and the *sayan* were skilled at shooting a handgun, but, probably hadn’t killed before. *And neither have I.*

*What if I fail? Will I be reunited with Lisa, or will my body lie cold and alone for eternity?* He felt her voice, urging him, *Kill him, Jon. For me.*

He took a deep breath as Yakov's voice whispered through his ear bud. "On my signal. Go, go, go."

As he stepped into the rear of the restaurant, the world appeared to move in slow motion. Two steps in, he saw Houmaz leave the cover of the men's room doorway, aim and fire a single shot.

The back of Axel's head exploded, raining blood and brain on Jon's face. Blinded, Jon overturned an empty table near the exit and crouched behind it. Mathematics told him he hadn't a chance of surviving. He could hear Lisa's voice babbling in his head. Fear froze him for several seconds. He felt his heartbeat pounding in his chest, heard his breathing, and felt a wall of terror close on him.

Two shots splintered the wood of the overturned table, pulling Jon back to his mission. He used his forearm and hand to wipe the blood from his face, while conjuring a set of alternatives. Move right or left?

Rising, he bolted left as he glanced at the place where he'd heard the sound of Houmaz's gun seconds before. No one was there. Jon sprinted toward the men's room. He held his Beretta in a two-handed grip, ignoring the few screaming occupants. Several pulled out their cell phones. He knew they were calling 911.

The men's room was empty. Then he heard three more rounds explode from the entrance of the restaurant. He sprinted from the bathroom and through the front door, onto the sidewalk. He found them Yakov and Shimon there, lying face down, the backs of their heads bloody. The medijector rolled away from Yakov's body. Jon realized that

while he had been checking the men's room, Houmaz must have exited the back. He must have run through the alleyway and looped around to surprise Yakov and Shimon from behind at the front of the restaurant.

Houmaz had disappeared.

“Shit,” Had the bomb-maker returned to the back of the restaurant? Jon ran through the alleyway along the side of the restaurant. Empty. He headed back toward the street again.

Many people were running away, some shouting and screaming. He saw a black van screech to a stop. Houmaz jumped in through the back door. Jon had no shot. He slammed his fist into the building wall.

Now he heard distant sirens closing. He looked around. Those who had been there were either gone now or running away. The adrenaline surging through him had narrowed his focus, and he felt the high it gave him. Seconds remained before the police arrived.

Shaking his head to clear it, Jon took off his bloody jacket and dropped it in a trashcan at the edge of the alleyway. He walked away from the restaurant, down the street, looking for Rimora. Jon kept his eyes focused ahead, walking with deliberation as two police cars sped past, their lights glowing, stopping where his team lay dead. He took out his cell phone and dialed Rimora's number. No answer. But he could hear its nearby ringing and followed the sound.

She lay amidst trash in one of the alleyways across the street from the restaurant, shot in the chest, her breathing shallow. If the Liquid Armor had failed, the shot had to

have come point-blank. Jon eyed the distance from the restaurant and back to where the van had been.

No, Houmaz couldn't have done this. It was too far for him to run, shoot her, and return to where the black van had picked him up. So he must have allies somewhere. Wary that he was still a target, he cupped her head and studied her wound. He was sure it was a fatal shot; blood spurted from above her breast, just below her collarbone in rhythm to her heartbeat. She was hyperventilating and her face was going gray.

There would be no way to get her to a hospital before she died. He knew she knew it. "Who shot you?"

Her lips moved as if she was talking, but he could hear nothing.

He picked up her cell and dialed 911, reporting her condition and location. It should take less than three minutes until an ambulance arrived, and by then he'd have to be far away. He forced himself to stay calm and focused. It wasn't working well.

"Rimora, try again. Who shot you?"

She pulled his head to her mouth and managed to whisper a single word: "Bloodridge." A trickle of red dripped from her slack mouth. Her head fell back and her eyes began to glaze.

His team had failed. There was a heavy weight on his heart, the responsibility for all their deaths. It had all happened so fast. No time to think, no time to calculate, no data for projections. He realized mathematics was truly useless.

*Lisa, love, I've failed you.* Tears mixed with rage, clouding his vision. He got up and ran from the alleyway.

How could one man have decimated his entire team? Where had Houmaz gone?

Who had helped him? What would he tell Mother?

And, what the hell was Bloodridge?