

# Prologue

Two months ago

The time to start recording came and went, and I hesitated still. I studied the screen, searching for whatever was causing my reticence. I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing I hadn't seen a hundred times before. A simple room, ten feet by twenty feet, with only a beat-up desk and chair. No place to hide. No weapons of any kind. A room tailor-made for a takedown.

Yet a vague unease made me pause, like the fleeting stench of something rotten under the floor. Made me believe that perhaps I wouldn't want anyone in the future to see what I was about to witness.

The camera was located just above the single door to the room, allowing me full view of its entire length. The image it fed to the screen was grainy and harsh as it strained to work in the dim light of the single fluorescent bulb. The corners were hidden in shadows, but the desk was clearly illuminated. Good enough to trigger the assault when the time came.

I caught movement, and saw the top edge of the door swing open. I quickly dialed my phone, alerting the team. "Stand by."

A figure entered the frame. It was a woman. Not the target. She moved to the desk, then turned around, giving me a clear shot of her face. I knew her.

*What the hell is she doing here? Why didn't she stay home?*

I said, "We have an innocent on the X. I'm calling an abort."

A voice I didn't recognize answered. "Mission takes priority. No abort."

A small girl entered the screen, running to the woman.

"You've now got two innocents. One child. Abort. My call."

"It's not your call. It's a Taskforce call, and the mission takes priority."

The decision made no sense. We had plenty of other opportunities to get this guy, and the noncombatants had the potential to turn the hit into a fiasco. At the very least, it would be impossible to keep the operation from leaking out.

"Who the hell is this? Put on the team leader."

All I heard was "Mission takes priority." Then a click as he hung up. I was redialing when another figure entered the room. A man, but not the target. The man didn't turn around, but I knew who it was. The woman's face showed fear, and the child darted behind her back. The man advanced toward them both and I saw he was holding a club.

The phone connected and I said, "The innocents are in trouble. Execute, execute, execute."

The mechanical voice said, "Trouble from the target? Is the target there?"

"No. It's someone else, but he's bad. I know he's bad. Get in there!"

"The mission takes priority. We wait for the target."

The man jabbed with the club like he was holding a sword, hitting the woman in the stomach. She doubled over.

"Dammit, get your ass in there, now!"

The phone was dead.

The man swung the club upward, catching the woman in the jaw. The impact split her jaw sideways in a spray of blood, the stark white of bone punching through the red flesh of her cheek.

I screamed at the flickering image and grabbed the edges of the monitor, desperately trying to will myself to the scene.

The woman fell backward onto the desk, exposing the girl. She cowered at the man's feet, tears running down her face, her mouth open in a shriek I couldn't hear. The man grabbed her by the head and lifted her off the ground. He rocked to the left once, then violently swung to the right, whipsawing the small child into the wall by her head. She crumpled in an unnatural heap. The man withdrew a knife from his jacket and held it up high. In full view of the camera. For me to see. Then he began to slowly turn toward the lens . . .

. . . And I woke up, drawing in great gulps of air. I was disoriented and bathed in sweat, the feeble light from the outside parking lot finally showing me the corners of the hotel room. I felt an echo, and wondered if I'd screamed for real. I began to sit up when the nausea hit. I scrambled for the toilet through the dim light, reaching it a second before spewing out everything I had eaten in the last six hours.

The heaves subsided and I curled next to the toilet, still trembling at the aftershocks of the dream.

The man had returned, and now he was bringing my family with him.

*I should have never looked at the pictures.*

It had been four years since the murder of my wife and daughter, and I had never had a dream of the crime. I had dreamed of the man plenty. He stalked me like a Freddy Krueger, popping up in all sorts of weird ways, but never with my family. Never. I had been blessed with nothing but good dreams of them. Dreams that brought melancholy when I awoke, but good nonetheless. Ephemeral moments I tried hard to remember, but which faded away like fog hit by the morning sun. Unlike this one. Acid wouldn't remove the etching it had left in my soul, I knew.

*Why did I look?*

I had come back to Fayetteville, North Carolina, to check on any progress in solving the crime, like I had done about every three months since the murders, as if my presence would cause something to break free. It never did. The case was as cold as Jimmy Hoffa, and the police

barely tolerated me now. They were nice enough, but they knew it was going nowhere, and looked at me with pity.

This time I had decided to study the crime- scene photos to see if there was a clue they were missing, something I'd never done before. Something others had warned me against. Four years ago the officers had said the pictures were brutal, and because of it, at every visit, I had never asked. This time I did. And they were right.

Now the pictures had brought the stalker to my family. Had allowed him unfettered access to torture me every night, a faceless mass of evil that would never leave me in peace.

In all the dreams I saw him from the back. He never turned around. Never showed me his true nature, content to simply taunt me, like he had tonight with the knife. Deep inside, a part of me begged for him to show himself. A corner of my soul that lived in blackness and craved escape. Craved relief. It believed that if I could see him, I could kill him.

And it desperately wanted to do that.

# 1

## Present Day

When she saw her suitcase come up first on the conveyor belt, the investigator's face broke into a smile. The flight from Beirut had been a long one, and she was ready to get home. Had she known how little time she had left, she most definitely would have preferred it to come out last—or not at all.

Across the baggage claim area, a man caught her expression, and grinned to himself at the irony: He knew the airport luggage tag that had proved so efficient in delivering her suitcase would also be the cause of her death. All he needed to do was make sure she didn't rip it off and throw it in the trash before she left the airport.

He watched her intently until she had exited, suitcase in tow, traitorous baggage tag flapping in the breeze. In her right hand, she held a briefcase, and in the swing of her arm the man caught a glimpse of the handcuff that attached it to her wrist. That was his target. Along with destroying the information in her brain.

She exited in the direction of the shuttle bus that ferried passengers to the Rotterdam train station, but she could just as easily be hiring a car to her destination. Either way, he knew where she was going: Leidschendam, home of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

Established in 2009, the tribunal was tasked with investigating the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri, the former prime minister of Leb-

anon. Amid rumors that high-ranking officials in the Syrian government and their terrorist proxy Hezbollah had a hand in the murder, massive protests had rocked the country demanding the removal of Syrian occupation forces from Lebanon. Called the Cedar Revolution, it proved to be the catalyst for a Syrian withdrawal from the country later that year. It could have ended with that—a Syrian retreat and rumors—but the tribunal was now investigating in earnest, turning over stones that should have been left untouched. Four Hezbollah foot soldiers had already been indicted, with the inquiry climbing ever higher into the ranks.

The woman was an investigator for the prosecution, and had finally managed to find a well-placed person who would talk: a disgruntled former Syrian intelligence asset with an axe to grind and some inside knowledge. He had spent an hour and a half with the investigator. Hezbollah had done what it could to prevent the meeting, but failed, managing only to make an example of the man after the fact to dissuade others who might think about talking.

The information she had discovered was extremely volatile. Knowing Hezbollah's reach, she had chosen not to file a report electronically, and certainly wasn't going to discuss it on a phone system run by the very terrorists she was investigating. She flew straight back from Beirut to the tribunal's office in the Netherlands to report in person. Which is where the man hunting her came in.

Unlike the bloodbath that could be perpetrated in Lebanon against Lebanese civilians, the investigator would have to be handled with care. Her death could in no way be attributed to her work. It *had* to appear innocent.

At first, the man thought about simply mugging her and stealing the briefcase, leaving her as a victim of random street crime. After conducting a site survey, he realized that wouldn't work. Unlike his hometown of Chicago, there wasn't a whole lot of violent crime in the Netherlands, and certainly none in the middle of the day in Leidschendam. Not to mention he'd probably have to cut off her hand to get to

the contents of the briefcase, which would raise an eyebrow. He'd have to be more subtle.

After giving the investigator some time to clear the area, the man left baggage claim and returned to his car. He didn't necessarily need to beat her to her residence in Leidschendam—he had already prepared the reception—but he wanted to see the results in real time. If she traveled her usual route, she'd take the train and then walk home. That meant a three-stage movement: shuttle to the Rotterdam train station, train to the Leidschendam station, then a little over a quarter of a mile trip remaining to her house. If she followed her pattern, she'd walk it instead of getting a cab. He should be there in plenty of time to enjoy his work.

He was quite proud of his scheme, and wished his new career allowed him to converse with others like him. If there were any others, that is. He hadn't run into any with his professional skills. Just pipe-swingers with no imagination. He'd only conducted four missions where the objective had been targeted killing, but he'd found he had a talent for it. Three had been flawless. One had been an unmitigated disaster, causing him to flee the United States for good, and landing him in his current position working with Syrian intelligence. Or Hezbollah. With the spasms rocking Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring, he wasn't sure who was footing the bills anymore.

He was a meticulous planner, something that had facilitated his success in his new career field, just as it had facilitated his success in the U.S. Navy SEALs while fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Using that skill, he had found his method of execution.

While there was little street crime, one thing the Netherlands did have in abundance was natural gas. The country was the second largest exporter in the European Union, and almost every house used it.

Preparing the home in the investigator's absence had been easy. Figuring out how to trigger it had been hard. He had to *know* she was home, and had to execute fast enough to prevent her from discovering the trap he had prepared, which meant a surveillance team.

In no way did he want to involve anyone else in the operation, especially not a bunch of swarthy Hezbollah gunmen who would stick out like charcoal in the snow. Being blond-haired and fair-skinned allowed him to move invisibly throughout the country, but he had no other contacts like himself. No one that could blend in. Still, he also knew that singleton surveillance efforts were a recipe for failure, which left him in a little bit of a catch-22. Until he stumbled upon the baggage tag idea.

The airline she used had invested in radio frequency identification, or RFID, for their baggage control. A small transmitter was embedded into the destination tag given at check-in. Unlike a bar code, it didn't have to be seen to be read, and would register from a much greater distance. In use by everyone from Walmart to the U.S. Department of Defense for tracking merchandise and end-items, RFID was now being used to track passenger baggage in order to prevent the huge expense airlines paid recovering and delivering lost luggage.

The tag itself simply transmitted the name of the owner of the luggage and the destination, read by machines tucked strategically around the baggage control areas of airports. Nothing sinister or evil. Just a unique identifier for each bag. You couldn't gather any more information from the RFID than that which was printed on the outside of the tag in the first place, but if you wanted to trigger an explosion exactly when a certain person entered a kill zone, the tag was ideal. It just required a slightly different kind of signal receiver. The primary risk was someone else carrying the luggage. Luckily, the investigator traveled alone.

Using his Hezbollah contacts, he had gleaned the investigator's RFID signature assigned by the airline in Beirut, fed it into a reader located in her apartment, then daisy-chained it to the initiation device. He now had no need to keep eyes on her at all. Sooner or later she'd arrive home with her luggage, and she—along with her briefcase—would be incinerated.

He took the A13 away from Rotterdam, and twenty minutes later



he was boxing Sytwendepark in Voorburg, the town adjacent to Leidschendam. He passed through a traffic circle and took a left, then pulled into a parking space for a series of modern flats. Checking his rearview, he confirmed he could see the investigator's small one-story house on the parallel street, across an expanse of grass and sidewalks. He settled in to wait.

After thirty minutes, he began to grow antsy, wondering if maybe he should have mounted a surveillance effort. Wondering if she hadn't gone straight to the tribunal without stopping at home to drop off her luggage. Killing her after she'd delivered her report would be futile.

*She should have been here by now.*

He considered his options, toying with a kitchen magnet that housed a picture of the investigator with a man. He always collected something from each mission, and had taken the magnet while setting up his trap. It wasn't strange, like some Hannibal Lecter serial killer. He wasn't commemorating anyone's death, simply the mission itself, like the platoon sergeant in *Saving Private Ryan* scraping sand into a can for each beach landing. At least that's what he told himself, even though everything he collected was something personal from the victims themselves.

He glanced up the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of his prey. He was rewarded with the sight of a person dragging luggage down the promenade between his road and hers, about three hundred meters away. He couldn't be sure it was his target, but the odds of two people with luggage at this time, on this street, were pretty slim. He sank back into his seat and waited, checking his rearview for the front of the house. What he saw caused him to sit back up.

A man was stapling something above her front door. The same man from the kitchen magnet picture.

*What the hell?*

He looked out his window and saw the investigator still walking, closing the distance. She'd be at home in a matter of minutes.

He turned around completely, facing the residence. The man was

hanging some sort of sign over the door, like one of those happy-birthday stringers purchased at a grocery store. The sign was in Dutch, but he knew instinctively what it said. *Welcome Home.*

*Shit. It's a booty call.*

During the entire time he had cased the place, he had never seen anyone pay any attention to the house, which, of course, made sense now, since the investigator was in Beirut. He cursed his stupidity.

The boyfriend used a key and entered the home. If allowed to continue, he would find the trap the assassin had laid, and raise the alarm— before the RFID tag triggered.

Reacting without thought, the assassin exited his car and sprinted to the door. He saw the target in the distance, now close enough to identify. He had about thirty seconds. Maybe a minute if he locked the door behind him. A minute to kill the man and exit out the back of the house before the investigator inadvertently blew them all to pieces.

He entered, slammed the door, and locked it. He found the boyfriend next to the RFID reader on the kitchen counter, a bag of rose petals in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

The boyfriend shouted something in Dutch, then pointed to the RFID reader, saying something else. The assassin closed on him, grabbing the back of his head and slamming it into the counter in a blow that should have killed him outright. If not, it most certainly should have stopped the fight. Miraculously, the boyfriend rose, blinded by the blood in his face but screaming at the top of his lungs and swinging wildly.

The assassin danced back, out of reach, and picked up a vase, hearing the investigator outside. He flung the vase full-force into the head of the boyfriend. Unable to see to block the missile, the vase cracked him above the bridge of his nose and dropped him like a stone.

The assassin heard more shouting and turned to find the investigator in the foyer, raising her luggage as a weapon with both hands, the briefcase dangling off her wrist. He prepared to deflect it and continue the assault when he realized what was about to happen.

*She's going to kill us all.*

He had no firm idea of the RFID's reading range, but clearly, since he was still alive, it didn't extend to the foyer. He was positive, though, that if she threw the luggage at him, it would turn into a much greater weapon than she planned.

He saw her wind up to heave the bag, and began running. He glanced back and saw the bag turning in the air in slow motion, the tag fluttering like confetti from the handle. He hit the large plate-glass window at the back of the room full-force, oblivious to the pain as he punched through. He crashed beyond the brick protection of the walls as he heard the initiation of his clever kill-box: a small *wump*, followed by a blast of fire out of the window like the late ignition of a gas grill.

He rolled around on the ground for a second, ensuring he wasn't on fire, then rose and surveyed the damage. The outside of the house had contained the blast, but the inside, through the window, was an inferno.

*No way will they be able to find anything through forensics.*

He circled around to his car, milling in with the multitudes that had come to help or just watch the show. He fled the neighborhood at a leisurely pace, driving randomly for five miles before stopping and pulling out an international cell phone.

"This is Infidel. It's done."