



# ASSASSIN

ANDREW  
BRITTON

our greatest fear is the enemy within

[www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

Assassin  
by  
Andrew Britton

Copyright © Andrew Britton, 2007  
All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from *Assassin*

To find out more please visit [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

# Prologue: Baghdad

Anita Zaid folded her arms as she glared across the cavernous lobby of the Babylon Hotel. Not for the first time, she found herself hoping that the target of her righteous anger would suddenly come down with some sort of exotic fever, something specific to overly glamorous, thunder-stealing network reporters. Better yet, maybe her menacing stare could somehow infect the woman with subconscious doubt, leading to an irrepressible stutter whenever she stepped in front of the cameras. Anita momentarily brightened with this notion but knew it was asking a lot; unfortunately, Penelope Marshall had a reputation for handling the crushing pressure of televised journalism with the skill of a seasoned pro, despite her relative youth.

It should have been perfect. Anita was fortunate enough to have the best source possible, a cousin assigned to the Ministry of Defense. The man's access was incredible and well worth a generous stipend, which her employer would have gladly paid. In this respect, however, she was lucky again. All her cousin's assistance cost her was the occasional visit to his modest home on the outskirts of Baghdad, where he was given to bad cooking and good-natured but endless complaints about the Americans, much to the dismay of his long-suffering wife. His latest tip had arrived just forty minutes earlier, and for once, Anita was in the perfect position to act on it, bored senseless and lounging over cold coffee in a Green Zone café with Tim Hoffman, her American cameraman.

Twenty minutes and a couple of irritating stops at various checkpoints had seen her out of the zone and into the leafy streets of the Jadriya residential district, the unlikely site of the Babylon Hotel.

As she looked for a hole in the building crowd, Anita brushed her hair back from her face and sighed in mounting frustration. She had worked for London-based Independent Television for five years now and was beginning to wonder how much longer she could put up with the long hours and low pay. Her position as ITV's Middle East correspondent was a natural fit, as she'd been born and raised in Mosul before immigrating to England at the age of seventeen, where she'd earned a BA with honors in English at Cambridge. Intellectually speaking, she knew she was too young to be burned out – she had just turned thirty-six, after all – but at the same time, she couldn't help but feel that she might be missing out on better-paying, less-demanding opportunities. The desire to move on to something better had grown stronger in recent months, and days like today definitely didn't help.

The trouble had started soon after they'd arrived at the hotel. Spotting the bulky black cases in Hoffman's hands, the manager had stopped them as soon as they'd walked in, insisting that Zaid pay for 'a room' if she intended to set up camp in his lobby. What the man really wanted was glaringly obvious and not at all surprising. Anita was very familiar with the way things had worked before the American invasion, when bribes had been the rule rather than the exception. In the months leading up to the war, Saddam's Information Ministry had strictly controlled the movements and access of every Western journalist, and she had quickly learned to adapt, though not before enduring several heated arguments with the tightfisted accountants at ITV.

Unfortunately, the Babylon's manager had demanded immediate payment in cash, which Anita didn't have on hand, and the delay had given somebody time to send word up to Marshall's room. Penny Marshall was CNN's latest and brightest star, a twenty-something blonde from New Zealand. After hearing the news, the young woman had somehow managed to hustle downstairs in the space of three minutes, looking like she'd just stepped out of make-up. As it turned out, her presence at the hotel was pure coincidence. Her cameramen – she had two of them, Anita noticed, with a twinge of jealousy – had followed her down a few minutes later, shabbily dressed men with identical beer bellies. On arrival, they'd staked their claim in loud and spectacular fashion, which was exactly what Anita had hoped to avoid. The presence of both camera crews had opened the floodgates, and now every journalist in the city seemed to be aware of the man's imminent arrival. Zaid had clearly suffered the most; what had started as a respectable shot was now obscured by a rectangular lens hood and the heavily teased hair of the regional correspondent for CBS News.

'Anita, we've got to find something better,' Hoffman finally said, poking his bearded face out from behind his camera. 'From this position, I'll have him on-screen for less than five seconds, and that's a best-case scenario. The interview's out, you know. He won't hear one word over this bloody lot.'

She turned away, rolling her eyes in exasperation. Despite having been born and raised in New Hampshire, Hoffman had been adopting British speech patterns for as long as she'd known him. At first, she had shrugged it off, thinking it was a joke, but then, less than two weeks into their partnership, she'd been disheartened to learn just how seriously he took his British 'heritage.' Anita

had coached him against the annoying habit on several occasions, but this time she let it slide and began weighing her options, trying to visualize the shot from various locations. The second-floor balcony was no good; from where she was standing, she could see that the angle was all wrong, and besides, there seemed to be a number of security men blocking the stairs. At the same time, pulling back wouldn't help in the least; in fact, it would put her on the outskirts, where her separation from the crowd, ironically, would be too great. Viewers wanted a sense of excitement, a sense of being in the thick of things, but they also wanted exclusive material. A good compromise was nearly impossible to find, and Hoffman wasn't helping at all.

'You know, I'd be surprised if the man even shows up,' he remarked in a languid drawl. 'Once he finds out the press is here, he'll probably stay in the zone. Besides, if he *was* coming, he would have been here an hour ago.'

'He'll come,' Anita said, trying to push down her own rising doubts. Although the Sunni-dominated insurgency had been surprisingly quiet of late, the number of attacks had been increasing steadily since 2003, rising at a rate of approximately 14 percent per year. In accordance with the growing threat, Baghdad's major hotels – especially those that catered primarily to Westerners – had substantially enhanced their collective security measures, but the danger was still very real. 'This place is like a fortress, Tim. Didn't you see the gates outside? Besides, the man has bodyguards, police escorts . . . He'll come. You'll see.'

As Zaid maneuvered for position in the lobby, radio calls were steadily streaming out to the static posts that had already been set up on both ends of Abu Nuwas Street, 300 yards in either direction. Inside the building, the

reporters had been watched from the start by a rotating group of plainclothes officers with the Iraqi Police Service. The men who comprised the advance team had been carefully selected for their religious and political affiliations; all were Shiite Muslims, and most belonged to the Dawa Party, not unlike the man they were assigned to protect. From their position on the second floor, the security officers were able to maintain a constant watch on the crowd below. As they scanned for suspicious activity, the frequent reports they muttered into their radios were routed straight through to the lead vehicle of the approaching convoy.

Five minutes after the advance team vetted the group of reporters, a black Ford Explorer squealed to a halt in front of the building. The doors swung open, revealing four additional security officers. Each man carried an M4A1 assault rifle and an M9 Beretta pistol, weapons supplied by the U.S. Department of Defense. They climbed out of the vehicle and scattered, two moving across the road as the other two formed an identical pattern in front of the Babylon Hotel. The goal was to set up a hasty perimeter for the car that would follow, a close-quarter protection technique perfected by the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service many years earlier. Having learned the maneuver from their American training officers, the guards put it to use with rapid precision, calling in on a dedicated radio link once the area was secure. A white Mercedes sedan appeared a moment later, hunkering low on its wheels, gliding to a gentle halt beside the curb. A security officer reached for the door handle; the man stepped into the street, carefully avoiding a minefield of muddy puddles. The officers converged, and the man was swept from view.

\*

Inside the building, Anita Zaid was navigating the outskirts of the crowd when the reporters pressed forward without warning, their voices erupting in a torrent of unintelligible questions.

‘Oh, shit,’ Hoffman said. ‘Come on, we’ve got to –’

‘No! We do it right here.’ Anita swore under her breath, furious at being caught out of position, but determined to make the best of it. She turned her back to the crowd and fixed her hair, checked her mic, and smoothed her shirt in one fast motion. ‘Give me the count, Tim. Let’s go. We’ll make it work.’

As Hoffman settled the camera onto his shoulder, Anita felt herself slipping into the mode she knew so well: restrained enthusiasm, shoulders back, chin up . . . She was completely calm, a poised professional. This was the best part of her job, and as she looked into the lens and silently composed her introduction, she was reminded of why she loved her work so much.

‘Okay, you’re on in five, four –’

Hoffman’s voice was suddenly drowned out by a thunderous boom overhead. Confined by the building’s walls, the sound was strangely muffled, and Anita didn’t immediately recognize it for what it was. Apparently, neither did anyone else; they were all looking up in confusion, except for the visitor’s bodyguards, who were already dragging their charge back to the doors. The noise was almost like thunder, but sharper, not as prolonged . . .

And then came the second explosion.

Turning to the right, she saw it unfold with terrible clarity. A massive fireball emerged from the eastern stairwell, engulfing Penny Marshall, her crew, and a dozen bystanders in a blossoming cloud of orange fire. Anita had no time to react as something hard and hot heaved

her into the air, twisting her limbs in directions they were simply not designed for.

When she finally hit the ground, she did so awkwardly, something sharp lancing up her right arm. She blacked out for a split second, and when she came back, the pain was the first thing she noticed, but it was more than pain; it was pure agony.

She hurt all over, but her injuries, as bad as they were, were eclipsed by the surrounding images. She couldn't hear for some reason, and the silent scenes played out in a nightmarish collage: bloodied arms and splayed fingers tearing the air, mouths stretching open in silent screams, the dancing, blazing figures of those who'd been closest to the opposite stairwell.

It was just too much. Too much, too fast. Anita tried to let out her own scream of horror and pain, but it lodged in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to block out what she was seeing, but it was too late; the images were already seared into her mind. If that wasn't enough, an elusive piece of information was pressing against her subconscious, trying to inform her of a more serious problem.

And then she realized she didn't hurt anymore.

The knowledge swept over her in a terrible wave. No pain meant no chance . . . She didn't know where that thought had come from, but it played over and over in her mind like a terrible mantra, and she knew it was right. *No pain, no chance. No pain, no chance. No pain . . .*

She desperately wanted to feel something, *anything*, but her surroundings were already slipping away. As the darkness moved in, she wasn't sure if the debris falling around her was real or part of a panic-induced hallucination. Pieces of plaster and marble were dropping down from the ceiling, smaller chunks at first, and then giant slabs of

heavy material, crashing down to the blood-streaked floor.

Only a few seconds had passed, but no one was dancing anymore; the bodies lay still, black figures wreathed in orange flames. Anita tried to move her arms, her eyes fixed on the shattered main entrance and the open air beyond, but nothing was working.

And then she felt a sharp, sudden pressure at the back of her neck, and the darkness closed in once and for all.

## I. Washington, D.C.

Dusk was settling over the city skyline, layers of gray falling through rain-laden clouds as a black Lincoln Town Car sped south along the river on the George Washington Parkway. From the front passenger seat, Jonathan Harper gazed out across the Potomac as riverside lamps pushed weak yellow light over the black water. Although his eyes never strayed from the passing scenery, his mind was in another place altogether, fixed on the news that had come into his office less than four hours earlier. As a result, he wasn't really paying attention to the radio, which was tuned to a local news station and playing softly in the background. When the commentary began to align with his own ruminations, though, he leaned forward and turned up the volume.

'In Baghdad today, U.S. and Iraqi forces were put on high alert. Additional checkpoints were set up throughout the city, and the State Department updated the travel warnings already in place. This, following the attempted assassination of Nuri al-Maliki in the Iraqi capital. At approximately 12:14 a.m. Baghdad time, a pair of massive bombs tore apart the second and third floors of the Babylon Hotel, located just south of the International Zone. According to embassy officials, the prime minister survived the near-simultaneous blasts, although his condition is believed to be critical. Preliminary reports indicate that as many as twenty-five American civilians, mostly reporters embedded with the U.S. forces, are still

unaccounted for and believed dead in the aftermath of the attack.

‘In a press briefing held earlier today at the White House, President David Brenneman condemned the bombing and offered condolences to the families of those who were killed. In a surprising sidebar, he also reaffirmed his commitment to the goal of force reductions in the region. These reductions are an integral part of the president’s reelection platform, as they provide for the scaled withdrawal of U.S. forces over the course of five years. The president’s plan, which also calls for the return of four of eighteen provinces to Iraqi control by next April, has been ridiculed by the Democratic leadership as too conservative in scope. Even so, with this most recent incident, many are wondering if the president will be forced to rescind his promise to the families of America’s servicemen and women, a move which would almost certainly cost him the election in November.

‘Moving on to other news, demonstrations in Beirut were brought to a halt yesterday when —’

Harper switched off the radio. The report hadn’t told him anything new, which wasn’t surprising. He already knew far more about the current situation than the Washington press corps ever would, despite their collective fact-gathering abilities.

As both the deputy director of operations (DDO) and director of the newly formed National Clandestine Service, Jonathan Harper shared the number three spot in the Central Intelligence Agency with his counterpart in the Intelligence Directorate. Despite his seniority, only a handful of people on the Hill could have picked him out of a crowd. The reason for this was simple: the name of the presiding DDO was almost never released to the public, the sole exception being Jim Pavitt’s appearance

before the 9/11 Commission in 2004. Even Harper's appearance seemed to lend itself to anonymity. His wife often joked that the conservative Brooks Brothers suits he favored were hardly worth the cost, as they made him all but invisible in a well-dressed city such as Washington, D.C.

It was, of course, an image he had long cultivated, and for good reason; his ability to blend into the background had saved his life on more than one occasion in his early years with the Agency. He'd spent much of the eighties running agents in the former Soviet Union, as well as sneaking high-value defectors out of the country through the western wastelands of Belarus and Bulgaria. Recently, his roles had been better suited to his age and station, which made them more ambiguous and much less interesting. Among other things, he had been assigned to the National Reconnaissance Office and a number of foreign embassies before assuming his current position four years earlier.

Harper's gaze drifted back to the window as his driver turned left on 17th Street. He wasn't looking forward to the upcoming meeting, as he knew it probably wouldn't go well for him. As it stood, the Agency's presence in Iraq was extremely limited, despite popular belief to the contrary. He had made a case for additional funding and personnel earlier in the year, only to see his proposal shot down by the newly installed deputy executive director. This fact, he was sure, had not been revealed to the president. Harper's immediate supervisor was a skilled politician in her own right and more than capable of presenting the facts in accordance with her own ambitions. As a result, Harper was sure that she had managed to relieve herself of most of the blame for this latest intelligence failure.

Worst of all was the timing. With the presidential election looming on the horizon, Brenneman was facing public unrest over the ongoing war, sagging approval ratings, and a popular adversary in California Governor Richard Fiske. Iraq, of course, was the key issue; the governor's proposal called for a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces on the order of 72,000 soldiers over the course of eighteen months, with scaled reductions to follow. Privately, Harper believed it to be an empty promise, but the American public had seized the opportunity to rid itself of a war for which the costs were rapidly becoming untenable. Brenneman's proposal was far less ambitious by comparison, calling for the gradual replacement of U.S. forces by combat-ready units of the Iraqi Army. Since the latest statistics suggested that less than 20,000 Iraqi troops currently met the requirements, the president's plan had taken fire from politicians on both sides of the partisan divide, as well as from the public at large.

Harper's vehicle approached the southwest gate of the White House, braking to a gentle halt next to the guardhouse. A pair of officers from the Uniformed Division of the Secret Service emerged immediately and proceeded with the security check. The gates swung open a moment later, and the Town Car rolled up West Executive Avenue to the first-floor entrance of the West Wing.

Harper climbed out of the vehicle and immediately caught sight of his escort. Darrell Reed was a senior advisor to the president and the deputy chief of staff. He was a lean black man with an easy smile and a genteel manner, but Harper knew that Reed's affable nature did not extend to the cutthroat world of D.C. politics. The deputy chief could be as ruthless as the next man in the exercise of his considerable power, as he had demonstrated on countless occasions.

Reed smiled as he approached and offered his hand. 'John, how are you?'

'Well, I think that remains to be seen. Ask me again when this meeting is over.'

The deputy chief shook his head, the small grin fading. 'The president is not a happy man, I can tell you that much. Ford's already here, and they've had some words.'

Harper grimaced. 'She's supposed to be in Israel with the director.'

'She was on her way back to take care of some routine business,' Reed replied. 'The president called her in this morning.' He cleared his throat. 'It's the timing, John, and the civilian casualties. He wants some answers.'

'So do I, but it's going to take some time.'

'Unfortunately, that's the one thing we don't really have.'

Harper nodded glumly; he knew what Reed was referring to. In the press briefing earlier that day, the president had assured the American public that the murder of U.S. civilians in Iraq would not go unpunished. With the election less than two months away, those words would not be soon forgotten.

'We haven't even seen a claim of responsibility yet. I just hope he can follow through on the promise.'

'Well, that's where you come in. He's expecting you.'

Harper shrugged. 'Lead the way.'

## 2. Washington, D.C.

Once inside, they passed through another security check and began the 70-foot walk to the Oval Office. As always, Harper couldn't help but think about how easy it was to get into this building. It was all an illusion, of course; despite the apparent lack of security, he was well aware that the Secret Service had eyes, electronic or otherwise, on virtually every part of the West Wing, including the adjacent hallways that led to the president's corner office. When they stepped into the room, the deputy chief of staff gestured to one of the couches scattered over the presidential rug and said, 'Take a seat, John. I'll go and see what's holding him up.'

'Thanks, Darrell.'

Reed walked out, giving the DDO the opportunity to briefly examine his surroundings. It wasn't often that he found himself alone in the president's office, and the small space contained enough of his country's past to keep Jonathan Harper, a self-proclaimed history buff, absorbed for hours. His eyes drifted over numerous oil paintings, most of which had nautical themes, before coming to rest on the towering colonnade windows. Soft light from the bulbs in the Rose Garden spilled through the panes, working with the dim interior lamps to illuminate the polished surface of the president's desk.

Harper knew that the beautifully detailed piece had been crafted from the hull of the HMS *Resolute*, a British vessel abandoned in the Arctic Circle in 1854. In 1855, the ship was discovered by an American whaler as it was

drifting over 1,200 miles from its original position, having dislodged itself from the ice in which it was mired. Over the course of the following year, the vessel was restored by the American government and returned to England as a gesture of goodwill. When the *Resolute* was retired in 1879, Queen Victoria commissioned a desk made from the timbers, which she then presented to Rutherford B. Hayes. Almost every president since had used the desk during the course of his administration.

He was about to stand to get a closer look when the door leading to the Cabinet Room was pulled open. Harper rose as President David Brenneman walked in, followed soon thereafter by Rachel Ford. The deputy director of Central Intelligence, or deputy DCI, was a pale, trim woman in her early forties. As usual, her shoulder-length hair was slightly askew, tendrils of dark red framing her attractive, albeit sharp-featured, face.

Brenneman approached and offered his hand. 'Good to see you, John. How's Julie?'

Harper nearly smiled at the mention of his wife, but stopped himself when he saw the president's grave expression. 'She's doing well, sir, thanks.'

'Glad to hear it.' Brenneman forced a tight smile of his own and gestured to the couch. 'Please, take a seat, both of you. Make yourselves comfortable.'

The president walked behind his desk, shrugging off his suit jacket as the two CIA officials picked out chairs. A navy steward moved into the room and deposited a tray bearing a small carafe, cups, and creamer. The man withdrew as Brenneman joined them in the meeting area, smoothing a blue silk tie against his crisp white shirt.

'So,' he said, fixing them both with a serious look. 'I have quite a few questions for both of you, but first, let's make sure we're on the same page. My advisors seem to

agree that this was a deliberate assassination attempt, as opposed to a random attack on a target of opportunity. I know how it's being carried in the press, but I'd like to hear your opinions.'

'I don't think there's any question,' Ford crossed her legs and focused her gaze on the president. 'Of course, I'd like to know what he was doing outside the zone in the first place. Setting that aside, though, it's just too much of a coincidence. A "target of opportunity" would warrant nothing more than a suicide bomber on foot or an RPG. We certainly wouldn't be seeing anything like the devastation that actually transpired.' She didn't need to expand on this; they had all seen the video footage aired by CNN.

'I agree,' Harper said. 'And there's something else: the Babylon has gates that are manned by the Iraqi Police Service. It would have been almost impossible to get something past them without a great deal of planning.'

'Or their help,' Brenneman muttered.

'That, too,' Harper conceded. 'We'll be looking into that, sir, but it might be difficult, since they'll be the ones tasked with the investigation.'

'That's true.' Ford fired her subordinate a disapproving glance. 'We *do* need to be careful about whom we trust in the IPS, but I wouldn't recommend trying to cut them out of the loop. That will set a negative tone at a very sensitive time, especially if al-Maliki doesn't survive the assassination attempt.'

*And you're advising the president on things that don't concern you,* Harper thought. Ford was an outside appointee; most of her career had been spent serving the constituents of Michigan's 3rd Congressional District. After four terms in the House, she had turned her attention to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where she'd served as

dean prior to accepting the president's nomination earlier in the year. In Harper's opinion, she still had a lot to learn about her new position, particularly the limits of her questionable expertise.

It looked like Brenneman caught it, too. He glanced sideways at his deputy DCI, the message clear in his stern expression, but she missed it entirely as a noise intruded. Ford snatched her cell phone off the table and flipped it open impatiently. 'What is it?' She listened intently, then turned to the president. 'Sir, this is urgent. May I . . . ?'

He nodded abruptly. Ford jumped to her feet and walked into the adjacent Cabinet Room, closing the door behind her somewhat harder than necessary. Brenneman shot his subordinate a bemused glance. Harper worked to keep his face impassive, but suspected the president knew exactly what he was thinking.

His suspicions were confirmed an instant later. 'Something on your mind, John?'

Harper shook his head in the negative. Leaning forward to pour himself some coffee, he idly wondered why he harbored such an intense, transparent dislike for Rachel Ford. It wasn't that he found her lacking in intellect; her education, beginning with Sarah Lawrence and culminating in a JD from Harvard Law, could hardly be found wanting. The fact that she was technically his superior didn't bother him, either; Jonathan held no reservations when it came to working for a woman. After all, he had done so often enough in the past, and it had never been a problem before. In short, he didn't know how the animosity, which was decidedly mutual, had come about.

The president was leafing through a briefing folder. 'Seventeen American casualties? Is that right?'

The DDO cleared his throat and said, 'Actually, sir, that report is several hours old. The latest numbers in

from the embassy confirm nineteen dead. Five more are critically injured.'

Brenneman's dark brown eyes grew darker still, but he didn't respond. Instead, he tossed the folder onto the table and appraised his visitor for a long moment. Finally, he said, 'She brought up a good point, you know.'

Harper was momentarily caught off-guard. 'Al-Maliki,' Brenneman reminded him. 'What *was* he doing outside the zone?'

The other man considered his response for a moment, wondering if the president's main concern lay with the American loss of life or the attempted assassination of the Iraqi prime minister. 'Sir, when was the last time you were in Baghdad?'

'Six months ago, I think. I went to address the troops and to take a look at the new embassy.'

'What were the roads like?'

'God awful, and that's probably generous on my part. Of course, it's a straight shot from the airport to the zone, so at least the travel time wasn't too bad.'

'A straight shot for *you*, sir. Moving around Baghdad is different for everyone else, even senior Iraqi officials.'

A slight frown appeared on the president's face. 'How so?'

'Well, first they have to fill out a form that states where they're going and why. Then they have to request vehicles and bodyguards. All of this has to be done the day before a scheduled movement. It's very inconvenient, especially when, even after all of that, you still get stopped at three different checkpoints on your way in and out. Most of the top guys look for ways to avoid it.'

'Like avoiding the zone entirely.'

'Exactly. Only problem is, once you're outside, you're fair game.'

Brenneman nodded slowly, a little piqued at Harper's description. Iraq had topped his foreign policy agenda for the past four years; he didn't care to hear the place described as a war zone, though, in fact, it could hardly be described as anything else. 'Okay, next question. How did they know he would be there?'

'It's all speculation at this point. I'm guessing we'll have to wait until they come up with a list of casualties. Then we'll focus on who's missing, such as bodyguards and hotel employees. We'll also take a look at building security . . . Like I said, sir, the gates were manned by the IPS. That might be a good place to start.'

Brenneman sighed heavily and ran a hand through his silver brown hair. 'It doesn't sound like we have much to work with.'

'I know,' Harper agreed. 'But we're just getting started, sir.'

'Fair enough. What kind of fallout can we expect from this?'

The DDO mulled over the question for a moment. 'It's been unusually quiet over the past several months, but this could definitely serve as a catalyst. We'll probably see increased insurgent activity in the major cities, particularly Baghdad and Fallujah. Of course, some of that depends on what happens with the prime minister.'

Brenneman got to his feet and moved to the windows, looking over the South Lawn for a long moment. 'This couldn't come at a worse time,' he finally murmured. 'Even if he makes it through. It's hard to justify troop withdrawals when we can't guarantee the safety of the senior leadership.'

He suddenly seemed to come back to reality. 'What kind of assets do you have over there?'

Harper ran through the list in his head. 'Exley, sir. He's

one of our guys in the embassy, used to be army intelligence. He's connected in all the right places. Keith Moore is chief of station. Jenna Thompson's the head tech officer –'

'What about Kealey?'

The question seemed to hang in the air for a long time. 'He's in the area. A little farther to the west,' Harper replied cautiously. 'But I don't know if he's ...'

'Available?' The president turned from the window to stare at his subordinate. 'Is that what you were going to say?'

Harper frowned but didn't respond.

'Is he up to speed in the Middle East?'

'As much as anyone.'

'You may not be aware of this, John, but I took an interest after what happened last year. I know he asked to come back in an official capacity. I also know that his request was initially rejected by Director Andrews, and that you intervened and signed the waiver when he wouldn't talk to the in-house counselors.'

The president paused and shot the DDO a curious glance. 'Why did you do that, by the way? I never had the chance to ask you.'

Harper was uncomfortable with the question, and it showed. 'Kealey's a good man, sir. He's been through a lot, but he's not the type to respond to any kind of counseling. It wouldn't have helped. As for bringing him back inside ... Well, let's just say I couldn't turn him down. Not after what happened.'

Brenneman considered this for a long moment, finally turning back to his guest. 'John, I need to know if this goes any deeper. The press will be all over me if I don't stick to the timetable, but I can't start pulling soldiers out with the knowledge that I'll have to send them back in six

months. More to the point, someone has to be held accountable for this. I need someone who can move fast and get results. If Ryan's already over there, so much the better.'

Harper shook his head. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think he's the right man for this.'

The president did not respond. Instead, he assumed a neutral expression and motioned for Harper to continue.

'For most things, I'd put him out there in a heartbeat. But not in this case. There's too much riding on it, and lately, he's been . . . taking chances.'

Brenneman furrowed his brow. 'I know he got hurt. Is that the problem? Because if that's an issue . . .'

'Physically, there's nothing wrong with him. That's not what concerns me.'

Another aching silence. 'Look, John, I appreciate your honesty. At the same time, you brought him back to the Agency for a reason. Unless you can point to something specific, we need him on this. *I* need him on this.'

Reluctantly, Harper nodded. Brenneman glanced at his watch and stood, ending the conversation. As the other man got to his feet and started toward the door, the president's voice brought him to a halt.

'This will not pass, John. Find your man, and bring him up to speed. I want to know who was responsible, and soon.'

### 3. Fallujah

A dirty gray dawn was just beginning to lift as a helicopter beat a steady path east from the Habbaniyah air base, a small facility located 80 kilometers west of Baghdad. The Soviet-designed aircraft, now passing over the Euphrates River valley, had been used by both Taliban and Northern Alliance forces during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Since the enemy on the ground had been reluctant to open fire for fear of engaging their own commanders, the Mi-17 had been adopted by the CIA as a preferred means of travel in the region. Its popularity had begun to fade in recent months, as its role in the American fleet was becoming a well-known fact in all the wrong circles, but it still offered better protection than some of the Agency's more conspicuous aircraft.

From his seat just aft of the cockpit, Mark Walland peered through a grimy window on the starboard side as the outskirts of Fallujah appeared through scattered clouds, revealing broken walls of pale stone and low-slung cinder block homes. Although the view was far from scenic, Walland knew that things would look much worse on the ground. He wasn't looking forward to going down there, but it seemed as if he had been doing just that – heading into harm's way – for the better part of his short career.

Like the men in the cockpit, Walland was attached to the Special Activities Division, the Agency's elite paramilitary force. He was short but well built, with dark, restless eyes set deep in a sunburnt face. His light brown

hair was trimmed close, which put it at odds with the thick beard he had grown over the past few months. Walland had joined the CIA following his departure from the army three years earlier, at the surprisingly young age of twenty-seven. He'd seen plenty of action as a captain in the 82nd Airborne Division, particularly in the mountains of Afghanistan. Still, the former Ranger knew that his experience was nothing compared to that of the individual who was seated directly across from him, on the other side of the wide, empty aisle.

Walland had been working on and off with Ryan Kealey for the past six months, yet the man remained a mystery. He'd heard a few things, of course, brief snatches of conversation caught during his time at the forward operating bases to the east. Mostly, they were rumors with respect to Kealey's military record: his time with the 3rd Special Forces Group, his role in the death of a senior Islamic militant in Syria, the two lost years during which his name had been placed on the Security Roster, the army's list of covert operators. Walland knew something of his recent work as well; Kealey's role in the prevention of a major terrorist attack the previous year was too big to have been covered up entirely, despite the best efforts of the operations directorate. For the most part, however, the man – and his past – remained a closed book.

The young operative broke from his thoughts as the airframe shuddered, the engines flaring as the pilot applied the aft cyclic. The helicopter dropped through the clouds with startling speed, the wheels bouncing once, then settling into the dirt a moment later. Walland stripped off his in-flight headset and saw Kealey do the same. The side door was pulled open after a few seconds, and they jumped down from the elevated fuselage, shielding their

eyes from the rotor wash as they hurried toward the waiting vehicles.

The dust began to clear as they approached, revealing half a dozen soldiers in civilian clothes and three battered Toyota pickups. The soldiers were spread out in a loose perimeter around the vehicles, which were parked next to the train station, a low-slung building marked by bullet holes and large areas of blackened cement. Located just north of the city, the station had been carefully selected for its value as a defensive position and its proximity to the meeting point. Kealey adjusted his load as he waited for Walland to catch up, slinging his AK-74M over his shoulder so that the black plastic grip of the rifle dangled a mere few inches from his right hand. When Walland appeared at his side, they walked over to the lead Tacoma. A lanky, dark-haired individual was leaning against the passenger-side fender. He straightened as they approached.

‘Good to see you, Ryan,’ he said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

Kealey took the proffered hand. ‘You’re right about that, Paul. It’s good to see you, too.’ He gestured to Walland and made the introductions. The two men shook hands in turn.

Paul Owen was an army officer based out of Camp Fallujah, the marine base located fifteen miles east of the city. As a lieutenant colonel in the 1st SFOD-D, he’d been one of Kealey’s commanding officers during the younger man’s time at Fort Bragg. Due to the peculiar relationship between the CIA and the Special Forces community, the thirty-three-year-old Kealey now more or less shared command with the man who had once been his superior officer. On the ride east from Habbaniyah, Kealey had wondered, with some trepidation, about how this turn of events might play out, but his fears were soon

abated. With the introductions out of the way, Owen turned back to him and said, 'So, how exactly do you want to handle this?'

'What have you been told?'

'The bare minimum. We have a location and a guarantee of safe passage on your end. At least, that's what you said when you called to set this up.'

'And that still holds.' He caught the Delta officer's skeptical expression. 'Look, Paul, we've dealt with this guy before. It's in his best interest to get us in and out of there without an incident. He definitely has the influence; he could probably lock down the entire district if he wanted to.'

Owen nodded in reluctant agreement. 'Fair enough. I've heard the same thing. How long will it take?'

'About ten minutes.' Kealey slapped the hand guard of his weapon. 'I'll be leaving this with you. They'll disarm me when I go in, anyway.'

'Okay. You said you had some imagery for me.'

Kealey was carrying a black Jansport backpack in addition to his rifle. Shrugging the pack off his shoulders, he unzipped the front compartment and extracted a thin manila folder. The folder was placed on the warm hood of the first Tacoma, and the contents withdrawn. Both Owen and Walland leaned in for a closer look.

'These shots were taken when we first set up shop in Fallujah,' Kealey explained. 'Two years ago this guy was low priority, and nothing's really changed in that department. The DO was never able to justify satellite imagery, so all we have are digital shots from the air.'

Selecting one of the closer shots, he pointed out a squat, dun-colored two-story structure. 'This is it. I know it looks like every other house on the street, but they'll have armed guards posted outside and possibly in the

buildings across the road.’ He fixed Owen with a serious look. ‘Tell your men to watch how they handle their weapons. These guys will be jumpy, and I don’t want any accidents.’

‘I’ll tell them, but I didn’t bring rookies.’

Kealey cast a glance around, reappraising the faces. His twelve years of experience told him that Owen had chosen well. They all had dark hair and complexions, and the weapons they carried, combined with their style of dress, would enable them to blend into the city landscape. ‘Are they yours?’

‘Every one of them.’

The younger man was satisfied. ‘You already have your route, right?’

‘Yeah. It’s pretty straightforward, but we set up the GPS just in case. It’s easy to get turned around if the bullets start flying. I figure it’s about three minutes in, once we cross the tracks. Then ten minutes for you to take care of business, and another few minutes out.’

The Delta officer straightened and seemed to hesitate. ‘This is a bad place to waste time, Ryan. I want to limit the risk to my men.’

‘I know,’ Kealey replied. ‘I’ll make it quick.’

Another hesitation, as though Owen could see through the younger man’s façade. ‘This is just a drop, right? I mean, we’re not equipped for –’

‘It’s just like I told you,’ Kealey said. ‘A simple drop.’

It was something new for him. He had made a decision back at the air base, a decision that, at the very least, would likely cost him what was left of his career. With the helicopter blades already turning, he had tracked down the necessary materials . . . He had lied to Owen, lied to all of them. A year earlier he would not have considered it. He waited for a tinge of guilt, but it didn’t come.

He realized that Owen was staring at him. To break the awkward silence, he said, 'Are the patrols still going out?'

'No. I personally spoke to the brigade staff for the 1st MEB. We're gonna be all alone out there.'

'Good.' Kealey closed the folder and handed it over. 'Show this to your guys. Maybe they'll have some suggestions. Let me know when you're ready to move.'

Owen took the folder and walked off. Kealey picked up his pack and started walking back to the last vehicle.

'Where are you going?' Walland called out.

'I saw a cooler back there. I'm going to grab some water. Just sit tight.'

The small convoy rolled out a few minutes later. Kealey rode in the first vehicle with Owen, who was behind the wheel. They pulled away from the train yard, wheels bouncing over the twisted remains of the rails as they crossed the 300 yards of open ground leading into the densely packed warren of the Jolan district.

The state of the city grew steadily worse as they headed south through the narrow streets. The rubble-strewn roads were bordered on both sides by shattered buildings and scorched cement. Although most of the damage could be attributed to the fighting, Kealey doubted that Fallujah would have been much to look at before the American invasion. The mosques in the city center were hardly visible from his location, the skyline obscured by thousands of drooping power lines. The buildings all looked alike; the only color to be seen was the occasional green of the date palm and olive trees that had survived the bombing runs.

Kealey was lost in thought as he watched the passing structures for movement. It had been four days since the failed assassination attempt on Nuri al-Maliki, four days

since Harper's call. Since then, he had talked to two other men, both of whom were prominent figures on the American payroll, but neither of whom could be trusted. Sitting across from him, they had plied him with strong tea and offered their justification for the monetary assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency. When pressed for specifics, they were quick to provide what appeared to be hard numbers, but it was all meaningless. The Agency's lack of assets and infrastructure in the region was not a well-guarded secret. Stories were rarely checked out with due diligence, and it was not expensive for these men to push the lies down the line. Eventually, it always seemed to come down to a staff officer in the Iraqi National Guard who would swear that, yes, those funds *had* been made available to the target organization. They had turned over their weapons, they were now beholden to the United States . . . Kealey could not accept these words at face value, because nothing ever seemed to change.

For this reason, he had decided to take a chance in the upcoming meeting. He had proof of financial irregularities in this case, but that wouldn't justify his actions if it all went wrong. What he was about to do was completely off the reservation, and if it yielded anything less than a flood of information, Harper would almost certainly run him out of the Agency. In all honesty, though, Kealey didn't care too much if that happened. He was tired of the work, tired of the Agency – tired of everything.

They turned off the main road, bringing them into an area that had obviously seen some of the worst fighting. A small boy watched the passing vehicles for a few seconds, then ducked out of view behind a low cement wall marked with Arabic graffiti. Kealey had just enough time to read the message: THE AMERICANS ARE

MURDERERS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN. SADDAM IS STILL THE LEADER. Up ahead, he could see a pair of fighters standing outside one of the few structures that was still intact. Apart from the two men, the street was empty. 'Stop here for a second.'

The Tacoma slowed to a halt as he used a handheld radio to call back to the following vehicles. The other man was studying the scene through the windshield. 'What do you think?'

'I don't like it,' Kealey replied. 'But then again, there isn't much I *do* like about this place.' He thought about it for a few seconds. 'I'll have Walland turn around and stay back with the third vehicle. That should give him clear shots from the back of his truck, if it comes to that. I want coverage on these guys up here, but like I said, they'll probably have people in the surrounding buildings.'

He turned to face Owen. 'Once I'm inside, give it a few minutes; then do the same. Turn your vehicle around. If something happens, they'll expect us to go straight for Highway 10. This way, we catch them off-guard.'

The other man nodded; Highway 10 ran through the heart of the city, east to west, and was the quickest route back to the marine base east of the city. 'When you start moving,' Kealey continued, 'watch those guards to see what they do. If you see something you don't like, hit your SQUELCH button twice, okay? They'll let me keep the radio.'

Another nod. Kealey made the necessary call to the following vehicles, and then they rolled forward, braking to a halt once more next to the guards. He handed over his rifle, stock first.

The Delta colonel took it reluctantly. 'You know, if something goes wrong, we won't be able to help you in there.'

‘I know,’ Kealey replied. ‘Don’t worry about me. Just watch these guys.’ He slung the pack over his shoulder and climbed out of the vehicle.

As he approached the door, one of the fighters gestured for him to raise his hands. He complied, and the man performed a quick search, briefly examining the PRC-148 handheld radio hanging from Kealey’s right hip. When he was satisfied, the guard made a move for the backpack, but it was pulled out of reach.

‘This is for Kassem.’ Kealey spoke softly in Arabic, but his tone left no room for argument. ‘Go and ask him if you must, but no one else touches it. He will tell you the same.’

The fighter, his face partially concealed by a wound kaffiyeh, measured him up with calm brown eyes. Kealey simply returned the stare, his face devoid of expression. Finally, the man stepped back, and Kealey passed through into the darkened hallway.

## 4. London

A light rain was falling steadily as a young woman hurried along New Bond Street, pulling the lapels of her coat together in a vain attempt to save her blouse from further damage. She was already soaked to the skin, despite having left the small café on Oxford Street just five minutes earlier. She had eaten her lunch alone, as usual, and the clouds had waited for her to step onto the sidewalk before opening up. Looking up at the swirling sky, Naomi Kharmai wondered if the weather had joined the rest of the world in working against her. As her green eyes flickered over the surrounding sea of umbrellas, she couldn't help but feel a little naïve, like a tourist in her own city. She briefly considered hailing a cab, but then decided she was already too wet for it to make a difference.

Kharmai had recently celebrated her thirty-first birthday, but her small, slender build belied her years. Her caramel-colored skin betrayed her Indian heritage, as did her jet-black hair, but she had never set foot on the Asian continent. She was British by birth, but she was also a naturalized American citizen. This last qualification was something of a necessity, as her office was located in the U.S. Embassy in Grosvenor Square, where she was officially listed as a senior analyst with the Office of Defense Cooperation. This description was not, however, entirely accurate. Naomi *was* an analyst, but not for the ODC. In reality, she was employed by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The recruiters had come looking for her nearly five years earlier. She'd been working at Bell Labs at the time, in the Computer Science and Software center in Murray Hill. Kharmai had truly despised the job, an entry-level position with little hope of advancement. She had graduated third in her class at Stanford, but that could only take her so far in a company that was home to some of the most brilliant minds in the field of computer engineering. Feeling more than a little neglected, she'd jumped at the chance to work in the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology, where she was given access to some of the latest innovations and, more importantly, the opportunity to actually use the technology in a meaningful way. But Naomi's talents were not limited to the science of cryptography. It wasn't long before her language skills earned her a place in the CTC, the Agency's Counterterrorism Center. It was there that Jonathan Harper, in desperate need of an Arabic language specialist for an upcoming operation, had found her the previous year.

The rain started coming harder. She tucked her head down a little and increased her pace as she crossed the square for the shelter of the embassy. Climbing the short flight of marble stairs, she pulled open the door to the service entrance, then dug her ID out of her purse for the benefit of the armed marine at the security checkpoint.

He gave her a smile, which she tried to return as they went through the ritual. After being passed through, she made her way directly to the elevator. Soon she was in her office on the third floor. The term 'office' was perhaps overly generous, as it was nothing more than a small, windowless cubbyhole. Secretly, Naomi suspected the room had been hijacked from some unfortunate janitor to make room for her. She sometimes caught herself sneaking little glances at the custodians she passed in the

halls, searching for the smallest hint of forthcoming retribution.

She turned on her computer, then shrugged off her coat and draped it over the radiator. She was doing her best to wring the water out of her hair when someone tapped on the door. 'Yeah?'

One of her fellow analysts poked her head in. 'Hey, Naomi.' A little grin appeared on her face. 'You forgot your umbrella again, didn't you?'

Kharmai sighed in acknowledgment. 'You'd think I would know better. I mean, I *did* live here until I was eighteen.'

'Well, if you haven't learned by now, you never will. Anyway, the boss wants to talk to you.'

'Okay. What's the agenda?'

'I'm not sure,' the woman replied. 'But you're the only one invited to the party. He wants you to bring these.'

She took the proffered list and glanced at the numbered files. 'Where is he?'

'Room C.'

Naomi raised an eyebrow. Conference Rooms A through E were secure, with cipher locks on the doors and lead shielding in the walls. They were reserved for the most delicate embassy business, and since most of what was said in the building was not for public consumption, the rooms were usually occupied. Still, it wasn't often that she was summoned for a private discussion with the ranking CIA officer in the embassy. In fact, she couldn't think of a single precedent, which made her slightly uneasy.

She shrugged in resignation; she'd find out soon enough. 'I'm on my way.'

As usual, Naomi nearly missed Emmett Mills when she finally made it to the conference room, balancing a

steaming cup of coffee and a stack of paperwork in her arms. At five feet three, Naomi was only a few inches shorter than the silver-haired chief of station, but she knew that the man's slight stature merely served to disguise a powerful intellect. By his midthirties, Mills had already earned four master's degrees from three different schools, as well as an honorary doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania.

Now fifty-four and approaching mandatory retirement, he was something of a legend at Langley. Naomi knew about most of the things he had pulled off during his illustrious career, but even if she'd been kept in the dark, she would have recognized the man's experience in his confident, finely drawn features. Mills was constantly wearing a slightly bemused smile, as though appraising the talent – or ineptitude – of the next generation. It always made her feel self-conscious, feelings that were not quite canceled out by the knowledge that he needed her. Mills had spent the majority of his career in the operations directorate; as a result, he relied heavily on Naomi when it came to technical matters. Since her posting to the embassy, she had been responsible for most of the electronic traffic between their department and the various British intelligence agencies.

'Glad you could finally make it, Kharmai.' She started in on a feeble apology, but he held up a hand to stop her. 'Do me a favor and kick on that doorstop. We've only got a few minutes before the defense attaché shows up to claim the room, so I'll make this brief. Did you find everything I asked for?'

She nodded as she took the seat across from him, nearly spilling her coffee in the process. Behind her, the door eased shut with a gentle click, locking automatically. She held up a folder. 'This is a copy of our current watch

list. All of these people have been linked in some way to one of the nine major terrorist groups in Iraq, and they're all based here in London. It's hard to keep track with our limited resources, but we do the best we can. Most of the ties are incidental: family relations, for example. Anything involving a financial transaction gets kicked over to Scotland Yard, MI5, and MI6. Unfortunately, they're a little less generous when it comes time to reciprocate, but that's understandable. This *is* their country, after all.'

Mills nodded along, neatly concealing his vague amusement. He'd long ago noticed Kharmai's peculiar lapses when it came to her own national identity.

She set the file to one side, then selected another, much heavier folder. 'This one came courtesy of the Ministry of Defence. It's a compilation of all the voiceprints they have on file at Whitehall, arranged in numerical order and based on cell phone intercepts here in the U.K. This is only a sample, of course. They've been fine-tuning the system, but they face the same problem we do in terms of geographical limitations. For us, the towers are based in Fort Meade, which confines the intercepts to the metro area. Here it's the M41 to the west and the A10 to the east.' She was referring to the main roads that circled the city. 'All in all, it's a seven-mile radius, or about twenty-five square miles, total, with the MoD as the epicenter.'

'Okay. Do we have an idea of the daily take?'

'More than an idea, sir.' Her smile was almost coy; she was on steady ground now, sure of herself and what she was saying. 'Don't forget, I know a lot of people over there. Right now, they're picking off between two and three hundred transmissions a day.'

He was surprised. 'That many?'

Naomi shrugged. 'Most of it's worthless. They've talked about pulling some of the keywords to narrow the

scope. The NSA is playing around with the same idea, but the towers on the roof at Whitehall are much, much smaller, which limits both the range and the amount of traffic they can handle.'

'Will they give us access to their database?'

'If we can come up with a good reason. We'll still need some search parameters, though. They have thousands of intercepts on file.'

'What about going the other way? If you had a recording, for example, could you run it through the system to look for a match?'

'Of course. In fact, that's the easiest way, but it still takes some time.'

'What kind of time are we talking about? Hours or days?'

She considered the question. 'Again, you're better off if you have someplace to start, like age or gender. Ninety percent of the flagged intercepts are male voices, anyway, but everything helps. Maybe a couple of days, if you were starting with nothing.' She tilted her head and frowned. 'Sir, what's going on? If this is about the Iraqi prime minister, we can send it to the top of the list. If there's a match on file, you'll cut down on a lot of your wait time. I think I can guarantee cooperation on the British end. The default position in a situation like this is to share everything.'

His smile was fading fast. 'What makes you think that —'

'Sir, give me some credit. You ask me to bring you our watch list and this' — she held up the voiceprint folder — 'which is worthless without the recordings, but you already knew that.' She paused for a moment. 'They found something in Baghdad, didn't they? A tape?'

He hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. 'Yeah, it's a

tape. But they didn't find it. *We* found it, here in London.'

That surprised her; it was standard practice to work with MI5 on such occasions. The Agency rarely took things into its own hands on friendly soil. 'And?'

Mills exhaled slowly and leaned back in his chair, debating his options. It was a tough call. If he brought her in all the way, he might end up losing her back to Langley. Naomi was a valuable part of his team, but if the recording gave them something to work with, she would probably use it to push her own self-interests.

He knew that she wasn't happy at the embassy. After what she'd managed to pull off the previous year, she would have expected a bump in the CTC, maybe to section chief. From what he had seen of her work, Emmett Mills was inclined to agree. He made his decision.

'Okay, Naomi, here's the deal. The final casualty list for the bombing at the Babylon Hotel was released two days ago. You know about al-Maliki?'

She nodded. The Iraqi prime minister had sustained serious injuries and was still listed in critical condition at an undisclosed location. The press had engaged in wild speculation, of course, one news agency going so far as to air an in-depth profile of al-Maliki's potential successors. The hysteria was beginning to die down, though, as it now appeared he was going to pull through.

Mills continued. 'We had to wait for the list to see who was missing. The hotel manager was killed in the blast, along with most of the prime minister's security detail. He was careful in that respect; the bodyguards were screened beforehand, so the survivors were cleared in a hurry. The gate guards were cleared as well. They were rotated on a daily basis, but in that case, the interrogations did yield some useful information. In the first week of September, a crew was brought in to repair electrical problems on the

second and third floors of the hotel. The work took ten days to complete. During that time, the assistant manager, Rashid Amin al-Umari, spoke to each of the shift leaders, asking them to pass the vehicles through without a security check.'

'That's interesting.' Naomi leaned forward in her seat. 'That's *very* interesting. Let me guess. Rashid has dropped off the face of the earth.'

Mills aimed a finger at her. 'Exactly. We can't find him anywhere, but it's certainly not for lack of trying. The Iraqi Police Service raided his house in Baghdad yesterday, and' – he handed her a glossy 8 × 10 – 'this morning we sent a team into this residence in Knightsbridge.'

Naomi accepted the photograph and studied it briefly. She was looking at a large home with carefully kept gardens and a beautiful stone façade. 'How does a hotel manager afford a house like this?'

'Inheritance,' Mills replied. 'It belonged to his father, but al-Umari lived there until three months ago.'

*'Belonged to his father?'*

'Karim al-Umari died during a U.S. airstrike over Baghdad in 2003. His wife – Rashid's mother – was also killed in the blast, as was his baby sister. Since the elder al-Umari had connections that went right to the top of the Baath regime, the bombing of his personal residence wasn't quite seen as . . . accidental. Rashid gave an interview to Al-Jazeera a few weeks after he buried his family, in which he made some fairly candid remarks about his feelings toward the United States.'

Naomi took a few seconds to interpret that last remark; Mills was known to favor the British trait of understatement. 'Well, that explains his motivation, I guess. But why that hotel in particular?'

'Because the prime minister frequently stayed there if

he had an early appointment the next day. In this case, al-Maliki was scheduled to leave for Paris at seven a.m., so to avoid the traffic moving in and out of the Green Zone, he booked an entire floor at the Babylon for himself and his aides. The summit was scheduled a month or so in advance. Al-Maliki's plans to attend were public knowledge, so the bombers made a decision based on precedent, which obviously turned out to be right. They had plenty of time to set up an electrical malfunction, which al-Umari used to get them into the building.'

'How did they plant the devices?'

'They built them into the walls on long-delay timers. Ingenious, really. The IRA tried something similar in '84. They failed as well, by the way, only their target was Margaret Thatcher and her entire cabinet.'

'What about the tape? Where was it found?'

'In a wall safe in the house. He didn't do a good job of hiding it, to be honest. He might as well have left it on the kitchen table.'

Naomi thought about that for a second. 'He didn't feel the need to hide it, probably because it wasn't supposed to exist in the first place. Al-Umari recorded it himself, right? For insurance?'

'It looks that way.'

'But you can't identify the other voice.' The chief of station shook his head in the negative. 'What about the gate guards? Maybe one of them —'

'Not yet. Remember, this is a new development, Naomi. They only found the tape this morning, but it's already in the works. The Iraqis will have a copy sometime tomorrow.'

'And the men who planted the bomb?'

'They've disappeared as well. One point of interest: the team leader was a German by the name of Erich Kohl.'

That comes from the gate guards, by the way; they didn't do the security checks, but they did sign the workers in each morning. Kohl only showed up in the second week. Interestingly enough, the German government doesn't have a contractor by that name in the region, at least not in an official capacity.'

Naomi nodded and reached for her coffee, which was already growing cold. 'So, Kohl might be the mystery man on the tape?'

'I'd say there's a good chance. What I want you to do is bring it to our British friends and see if they can dig up a matching voiceprint on file. The conversation takes place in Arabic . . . Will that be a problem?'

She shook her head. 'No, probably not. We can work around it.'

'Good. There's a copy waiting for you in Operations.' Mills leaned back in his chair and studied her plaintively. 'If you need me to get involved, that's not a problem, but I'd prefer to handle it at our level. You can see the problem . . . We are *not* supposed to have this tape. I hope someone owes you a favor.'

Naomi smiled as she gathered her things. 'Actually, sir, I think I have just the man in mind.'