Only The Eyes: A Novel

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ONLY THE EYES: A NOVEL

JASON MICHAEL PALOMO

Master of Fine Arts

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my parents, Joe and Rose, and step-parents, Mike and Gina, my wife, Adena, my son, Dov, and daughter, Mylene for giving me the love and necessities to complete this difficult project. I also want to thank my dear friends for listening to my plans, for creating with me, and for reading and editing my drafts. Thank you so much.
ONLY THE EYES: A NOVEL

by

JASON MICHAEL PALOMO, B.A.

THESIS

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Abstract

*Only the Eyes* revolves around a series of murders that take place in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, the government of which suppresses the media to maintain the nation’s reputation as a safe, innovative tourist destination. After the murders are leaked to the international press and can no longer be ignored, the Sheikhs of the country decide to procure an investigative consultant through manipulative means to help them capture the unknown suspect.

Former-Special-Agent Ramon Del Toro is now a true-crime writer, and he reluctantly takes on the difficult task of creating a psychological profile of the suspect, much to the chagrin of his young wife who is left alone with a newborn. When Del Toro arrives in the foreign country, he realizes that the U.A.E. is secretive and uncooperative despite requesting his help. To overcome this hurdle, Del Toro befriends a journalist who seems to know more about the recent crimes than the U.A.E. government has led on. As Del Toro quickly discovers, the vast divide between his first-world Western privilege and his host country’s Islamic authoritarianism calls his expertise in criminal profiling into question. After all, he’s not a real criminal profiler anymore; he’s a writer. Nevertheless, he has now found himself the designated expert in a foreign world that knows nothing about the kind of criminal plaguing their country, while he knows almost nothing culture who’s hosting him.

Beyond the surface plot of this crime-thriller, the figurative meaning of *Only the Eyes* expresses the seedy underbelly of a sophisticated urban hotspot that conceals its new world problems through shady dealings, hypocrisy, and suppression. The book’s purpose is meant to challenge the audience’s perception of a world it only experiences through smoke and mirrors. The task for the reader is to wade through the unorthodox literary devices of the novel to piece together who’s story is being told and who’s point of view is lost forever.
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Preface

The Inception of a Crime: Influences on Only the Eyes

Being an expatriate is as rewarding as it is trying. It often leads to a special perspective of one’s home country as well as the host nation, creating both an inexplicable pride and a vindictive forfeiture. That is, every benefit and drawback of your homeland makes you honor and defend the place in which you were raised, and every shortcoming and advantage of your fostering country tends to raise cynicism and judgement. Learning this life-lesson first-hand sparked the idea for the novel, Only the Eyes. The manuscript is an ambitious attempt to infuse depth and symbolism into a plausible tale of murders set in a very modern-yet-foreign world. On the surface, it is about a former-F.B.I.-agent-turned-writer who is bamboozled into helping an oil-rich theocracy catch an unknown suspect. The diabolical killer takes advantage of the country’s Islamic culture by waylaying victims dressed as a traditional Muslim woman. The crime thriller premise is ageless, but the true purpose of the novel is to expose a place that most readers in the Western world see as a glitzy Utopia for the rich and privileged because that is what has been portrayed in the media. However, as the characters wrangle with their differences in culture, the hypocrisy of one country’s sanctimoniousness flies in the face of the other’s self-righteous, savior complex. In truth, the burgeoning nation has based their ascension towards modernity, capitalism, and globalization on much of America’s twisted model, making both worlds responsible for each other’s intertwined love-hate relationship. In the end, both are the product, reflection, and downfall of each other, which the book subtly – and not so subtly – tries to convey.

Art is always open to interpretation and is assumed to be the creator’s vision incarnate, so the audience wonders if the rose they are experiencing is really a rose, a cigar just a cigar? Therefore, to seek clarity, let’s delve into the work’s inspiration some more. Where did the idea
snowball into a novel? In this case, the seed for the crime-thriller was planted one debaucherous night out on the town. During the hey-day of expatriates living and working abroad in a nouveau-riche country, the complexities of the humanity spirit were refracted through the country’s immigrant diversity, and it was shocking and eye-opening. What was noticed exactly?

This all seems too good to be true, too convenient, and one day, someone bad, someone deviant and ill-willed can and WILL swoop in here and take advantage.

Said country had gained its independence from its colonizer, becoming a legitimate world power within the timespan of our lives (or at least our parent’s), which is to say, it is still a baby in terms of its international standing and status. Unlike historically-rich countries whose annals bespeak of growth and establishment over normal trials and tribulations created through foreign wars and political upheavals which gives a nation its culture and character, such fledging countries – should they be successful – are marveled at for their lack of such milestones. In this case, this country has skipped much of that societal development because of the wealth and money from the sole natural resource – black-gold. Sure, there was always a people here, but the inhabitants essentially went from being meek nomads in the desert to world-powerhouse players with a dearth of citizens to reap the benefits. In fact, the country at the center of Only the Eyes has been so exponentially successful, it boggles the mind how it managed to do so, and more importantly how will it maintain such prosperity. The article “Social Engineering and Emiratization explains:

The UAE today sees itself in that image and as a rising benevolent regional power, betting on science, technology, social peace, coexistence, prosperity, development and stability, all matched with the hard power capacity to defend itself and its interests. This self-image seems unsatisfactory to a number of Western observers and analysts, who begrudge the “loud” moves of Emirati diplomacy and intervention to bring stability in various parts of
the Middle East, though these observers often fail to identify an alternative. (Sarker and Rahman. 173)

In other words, the country’s success story becomes one to be scrutinized and questioned as a sociological experiment. The country becomes subject to prying eyes, wondering how they skipped so many growing pains, and what will become of them? Like all nations, it puts its best foot forward publicly, and is often perceived through the propagandistic lens of its own design. Although *Only the Eyes* uses a fictitious crime to expose the many smoke-and-mirrors perpetrated by the country in question, the realistic crimes and actions of the story act as a symbolic death of the aforementioned hey-day. “…[All] is not well in this wealthiest of nations. So much so, that fully 50% of all the expats surveyed recently stated they were considering leaving for opportunities elsewhere” (Expatriate Group, 2015).

The hey-day came about before the bubble burst for expatriates looking to cash in on the country’s need for, not just skilled and educated workers, but all workers in general. The county’s population was so low, unskilled, and uneducated, they offered immigrants great opportunities to find something more than a similar job back home would provide. However, it was a short-lived time before the powers-that-be discovered the self-entitlement their welfare system was creating amongst their citizens. Observing some stereotypes, one blogger writes, “Most of UAE nationals both men and women (90%) work in governmental positions and are given higher salaries than their expatriate counter parts… Young Emiratis (teenagers) are usually very loud and maybe a little spoiled” (MantisShrimp, 2015).

During this period of ideal circumstances for expats, it was common for certain demographics to experience the kind of peace, safety, and prosperity perceived by the outside world. That is, it was easy for Westerns to come to this Middle Eastern country and land a good-
paying job with housing, end of service bonuses, medical, dental, and the general promise of a leisurely lifestyle. Beside the opportunity, it was a given that life in this country was virtually crime-free.

Incidentally, widespread knowledge of how this apparent utopia was shaped on the backs of poorer expatriates from neighboring nations was little known. In fact, the country itself goes through great lengths and pains to avoid any questions about its humanitarian policies and human rights record. This prosperity’s longevity has always been questionable; therefore, the harmony and good-fortune alluded to in the book is disrupted by a series of crimes. Crimes that are generally considered Western problems. Thus, the fictitious crimes are used to highlight the eventual and inevitable end of the country’s honeymoon stage. Therefore, the novel, *Only the Eyes*, takes a step away from the usual crime-thriller formula by implementing stylistic risks that will pursue this underlying theme of a tainted Utopia using the fictional crimes as a catalyst.

How does it do so? First of all, as much as every creative output stands on the shoulders of its predecessors, this book is no different than any other because it hopes to take flight from those influences to explore a different direction. For example, the tried and true template for crime thrillers are steeped in pulp fiction novels and film noir, and no novel of the genre could hope to escape their shadow. Therefore, to compare *Only the Eyes* to the pulp fiction film-noir it emulates, we can look to the movie *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino. That is, the layout and development of characters throughout the book are non-sequitur and jumbled much like the vignettes in Tarantino’s ground-breaking film, which reveals its plot out of sequential order (Tarantino). But that is not the end to its film noir ties. Furthermore, a film like *The Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed and written by Graham Greene, must also be acknowledge as a great influence on the beginning of *Only the Eyes* (Carol). They are unconsciously quite similar in that a writer becomes
a fish-out-of-water sleuth in a foreign country as he tries to navigate the nefarious situation he has unwittingly signed on for. In both cases, the setting is pivotal to the plot and interesting to the audience in their foreignness alone. One major difference, however, is that some of the people in The Third Man are portrayed as savvy, well-read intellectuals trying to get back on their feet by any means necessary after a World War; whereas, those portrayed in Only the Eyes aren’t placed in such a flattering light (Carol).

That being said, it stands to reason that the premise of such a book could seem petty and pejorative in how it portrays an entire country and its diverse citizens, so considerable thought was put into how Only the Eye might be received. In fact, we may ask, as the characters indulge in stereotypes and generalizations, does the author and the entire manuscript peddle ill-will or malice towards the population that is surreptitiously being maligned between the pages? The answer to this question brings up the original inquiry, What is this book about? If every Western expat who ever lived and worked in this country verified that all the events in the book are not just possible but probable, is the work slanderous? Or, is it revealing? Perhaps, prescient and predictive?

The book stands by the latter as its additional purpose and meaning. While, its surface intention is obviously to function as an exciting “whodunit,” it also intends to bare a nation’s policies for what it has done, what it is doing, and what it may do. Also, we cannot forget the flawed protagonist shares the guilt for being such an unqualified finger-pointer. In this sense, Only the Eyes seeks to be unique and unorthodox in the crime-thriller genre. Pointedly, the setting and its inhabitants operate together as a whole character of its own. Just as the shadows of Vienna through which the characters run in The Third Man make this film singularly engrossing, so do the dusty alleys stalked by the killer make for an interesting trip. Hence, the setting of the wealthy Middle Eastern country is the soundboard by which all the other characters bounce their actions.
Their actions and responses to the setting would not take place anywhere else in the world, yet the crimes are similar enough to what we know that reader can relate. For example, the antagonist is only possible in a community created by the naiveté, inexperience, and rose-colored glasses of a budding nation. The murderous “Alleyman” is a symbol for what happens when a culturally chaste, Middle Eastern nation embraces the capitalism it once so vehemently abhorred. The antagonist becomes a prediction of the fall, or at least a hinderance or stumbling block, that all rich, industrialized nations will face one day. And when an antagonist like this does manifest itself as some version or another in real life, who will suffer first? Who will suffer most?

The answer to this question unfolds just as the murders in the book do. The first to suffer and the most victimized are those deemed a lower status by the powers-that-be. They are selected as victims in the book because their very lives represent victimization in real life. People from impoverished countries, people of a certain skin-color have been systematically preyed upon by the entire short history of the nation-in-question. Presently, Amnesty International states:

The government continued to commit serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, cruel and inhuman treatment of detainees, suppression of freedom of expression, and violation of the right to privacy. The right to health was partially fulfilled. The United Arab Emirates continued to deprive stateless individuals of the right to nationality, impacting their access to a range of services. Courts passed death sentences and executions were reported. (Amnesty International)

Therefore, it makes sense that the book uses immigrants to its country as the same fodder to raise and nurture its antagonist. Whereas similar “throw away” populations exist in Western countries as sex-workers, drug addicts, and poor, marginalized citizens, the book exemplifies how this country has replaced the “dregs of society” with poor, innocent, hardworking, brown people. To
explain: Since this Middle Eastern country doesn’t have a population of “dregs” of which to speak, the general poor become synonymous for them. This is because the perceived Middle Eastern Utopia has created a place where there simply aren’t as many outlaw citizens. However, instead of being able to honestly boast such a feat, it must reconcile with the fact that they have replaced that demographic with a whole other subset of desperate citizens – desperate citizens who would place themselves in danger to an opportunistic predator like one’s portrayed by both the country as a character and the antagonist of the book.

Similarly, the protagonist “detective” is a jaded, tainted progeny of the kind of grown-up, fully-formed society the U.A.E. is trying to become. The detective comes in with the superficial swagger and confidence which the hosting country has come to expect from someone born in such a powerful, all-encompassing, first-world nation, but U.A.E. officials never expect their “hero” would be so flawed. Ramon Del Toro along with the other major American character, Alan Barret, consequently act as symbols of what is already possible when a utopia’s shine starts to dull. Their judgment and commentaries on the ignorance and mistakes made by the citizens and powers-that-be in book’s setting are indicative of their own ignorance and generalizations. Although their purpose seems to be a position of moral high-ground, their observations must be taken with a grain of salt, or in this case, a grain of sand. For once a taste is taken, the uncomfortable crunch of the foreign country’s landscape can’t be ignored for what it is, which is a place of simplicity, growth, and hope that’s scared to lose faith. Whereas, Del Toro and Alan come from a place that has already lost it. Thus, how can they look down their noses at a country and its populace for not knowing how to deal with the ills of the world that they have become so familiar with? Who is more reprehensible? Those that don’t know the evils that will befall them in their blind ambition,
or those that can recognize all the evils of the world because they have absolute familiarity with falling from grace?

In short, the book is as much about the disillusionment of modern societies, and all their pop-culture as it is about a killer controlled by hedonistic lust who revels in being sneaky, conniving, and deviant. Although the purpose of exposing a civilization for what it tries so hard to keep from the rest of the world may run in the background of this crime-thriller, it can’t be ignored as key theme in the book. And though the story’s veracity and authenticity might be questioned, like all crime-thrillers, it seeks to create a virtual world with genuine actions and tangible characters that can be imagined in real life, which begs another question.

Whatever would possess someone to pen a crime thriller? Only a fool, one would suppose. Even the renowned pulp fiction writer Raymond Chandler griped in his treatise on the genre as early as 1939 that, “The good detective story writer (there must after all be a few) compete not only with all the unburied dead but with all the hosts of the living as well” (Chandler, 3). Knowing the popularity of mainstream gumshoes in various media, an author would have to put one’s money on the veracity of the novel’s tropes and stock characters – on its plucky sleuths, its dastardly culprits, on the red-herring suspects, and on its overt display or its tease of violence – to keep people interested. After all, it is this violence that summons us to the edge of our own civility. It is our empathy which makes us question our own reality of safety. When we take up a piece of fiction, we put ourselves in the victim’s place, and, as we empathize, we hope that the victim will never be us. One thing going for any writer taking on such a raked-over genre is that a new author doesn’t have to pursue absolute verisimilitude in such a work, as the buckets full of fictional detectives have proven. Chandler concurs, “…the casual reader, who wants to like the story --- hence takes it at its face value. But the reader is not called upon to know the facts of life…The
author is the expert in the case” (Chandler, 7). Thus, the truthful adherence to political injustices and to criminal investigations is not necessary the fiction writer’s problem since that kind of writing is left to the genres of ‘true crime’ and ‘investigative journalism.’ As a long reputed hackneyed field, perhaps a subheading or some other asterisked distinction is advisable…if not necessary to break free from the canon. Daniel Mendelsohn reminds us of the importance of pursuing an asterisked distinction next to our name:

Who defines it? How do we know what’s “the greatest”? And, most elusively, what are canons for? Do they innocently enshrine “pure” artistic excellence, or is the agenda always somehow political?...Today, audiences as well as critics play a lively role in establishing which works get discussed, analyzed, noticed; the boil of resentment toward the literary gods — the Dionysuses who alone were once privileged to enshrine authors — has been lanced. (Mishra and Mendlesohn, 31)

As one can see, it certainly wouldn’t hurt an author to have a subgenre tucked in the ol’ hidden ankle holster or shoved up one’s sleeve. In the case of Only the Eyes, the novel strives to bend narrative conventions and seeks an untapped niche through its unusual foreign setting, its diasporic protagonist, and the literary inspirations it pays homage to.

As aforementioned, realism and relatability are elusive prey if a novel’s verisimilitude is a crime thriller’s chief concern; it is another thing entirely when we set out to create something unknown and unusual – in this case the strange customs and culture of Middle East for most Americans. Therefore, a balance of both is attempted in every aspect of Only the Eyes, right down to the very title, which, normally, is the last bit typed before submitting a manuscript for publication. For now, Only The Eyes is a working title that threatens to stick, for “…there is little help…for writers still stuck for a title. The good ones have all been taken. The bad ones were
rejected for a reason” (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, 35). Thus far, the title stays for the many levels on which it hopes to operate. Firstly, the title is so simplistic and basic for a book, that it almost seems familiar. It’s as if another movie or film we’ve encountered before surely exists with this name. Rest assured, although it is close, no other immediate creative work comes up under this specific moniker. The reminiscence it induces is not accidental as much as it is instrumental in striking an initial chord. Upon being introduced to the title, whether seen or heard for the first time, the reader’s mind will ponder what ‘only the eyes’ refers to. Is it a sentence fragment? Is it a command? Is it a question? Is it a homophone for the many “I”s whose perspectives flit through the revolving passages? Is it a nudging hint towards the symbolism associated with eyes – the soul’s doorway by which we imbibe the make-up of our personalities or the exit by which our essence leaves? Be they the stamp of truth or the tell of our insincerity, be they the spigot of our emotions or the pools of color that identify us, eyes are essential in the novel. The title lets us know it before we essentially know it. For certain, it is a great start for a novel whose agenda is to invite an audience with a close familiarity while whisking them away to a bizarre, faraway setting.

*Only the Eyes* models itself both on the ‘Chinese boxes’ from Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Letters to a Young Novelist* and the revolving perspectives of Jennifer Egan’s novel, *Welcome to the Goon Squad*. Llosa’s ‘Chinese boxes’ are stories that function on their own accord within the framework of a larger story, “Thus, the stories are connected in a system and the whole of the system is enriched by the sum of its parts” (103). While technically the ‘Chinese box’ model is not fully explored in *Only the Eyes*, it does riff on the technique with its placement of newspaper articles, an autopsy report, transcripts, and sarcastic blogs within the novel. However, one authentic ‘Chinese box’ has an embryotic life of its own. Specifically, the myth of the U.A.E.s’ boogieman is presented as an origin tale of *Umm Al Duwais*. The myth of this knife-handed, donkey-footed
*djinn* has been handed down through oral tradition for many generations as an old wives’ tale commonly known throughout the Middle Eastern Gulf region. As far as research can produced, she has never been captured literarily, so it was a pleasure to be the first do so. This boogieman-type figure punishes those who would wander off alone or those who would engage with strange women of loose morals, “And so, the story goes. She is beautiful, she is scary, she eats sinful men alive” (Al Suwaidi). The recreation of this fairy tale and its placement amid the action of the book in a scene when some drunken Emirati boys harass who they think is a lone woman exercising and are instead attacked by the antagonist provides historical and sociological context about the culture’s mythology and superstition.

Not only is the chapter entertaining in its imitation of Angela Carter’s short story, “The Bloody Chamber” from her book of the same title, it also attempts to take the same tone, which is quite serious, risqué, and dark. Unlike some of the other stories in Carter’s book that are humorous and sarcastic, “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Company of Wolves,” and “The Werewolf” share a sharper, gloomier tone.

“It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father’s knife and slashed off its right forepaw…The child crossed herself and cried out so loud the neighbors heard her and came rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch’s nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead” (Carter 128).

In *Only the Eyes*, the chapter about *Umm Al Duwais*, with a stylized archaic language reminiscent of fairy tales, speaks to the superstitious customs and the culture’s adherence to arcane beliefs in black magic that the Emiratis still hold on to even in the modern day, ironically flying in the face
of their strict religious beliefs. (Ask any local in this region of the world, and they all seem to have a viable fear in at least the possibility of real *djinn* sharing our mortal world.) This seeming hypocrisy reflects the books overall theme of the country’s bait-and-switch policies.

Umm Al Duwais is a *djinn*, which is something between a ghost and a demon; therefore, this particular chapters also works as introduction to the *djinn* myth, shedding light on their role in Arabic society. This chapters attempts to capture the tone of Angela Carter’s fairy tales and make commentary on the plight and poverty of such desolate places in the past. Other examples of the “…puzzles…nestled inside of each other” that didn’t make it in to this version of the book were fictitious psychological reports, diagrams, and even a dream-sequence one-act play that might make it into the final version of the book (Llosa 101). While these ‘Chinese boxes’ illuminate some cultural details and provide entertainment and distraction from the larger plot of *Only the Eyes*, the totality of the chapters performs a task more akin to those of Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Her book is the most similar to the novel because of the shifting characters and changing P.O.V.s with the purpose of making readers work a little for their supper. At times in *Goon Squad*, we must figure out who is speaking in every progressing chapter and how this character is related to the other characters in the book; a similar resolve is utilized in *Only the Eyes*. However, it is to be noted that although Llosa and Egan are the source of the novel’s overall format, there are many influences that populate its chapters on a stylistic level.

In fact, many crime-thriller authors and others not known for dabbling in the genre were researched, including Marguerite Duras, Vladimir Nabokov, Joyce Carol Oats, and, surprisingly, even William Burroughs. The most pertinent, as one might guess, was Joyce Carol Oats. The style of her first-person novel, *Zombie*, easily seeped into the *Only the Eyes*. As the deranged killer in *Zombie* tells his story, its matter-of-fact, confessional tone comes off as childish, but, more
importantly, it renders the nonchalance that a killer of this ilk takes when they are caught and given the chance to unburden themselves with a confession. Like the fictional killer Quentin P. in *Zombie* (based on the real serial murderer Jeffery Dahmer), the suspect in *Only the Eyes* occupies certain chapters that read as if his preparation and committal of crimes were merely a grocery list or a set of instructions being rattled off, rote and emotionless, no tears, no regret, no fuss. Although *Zombie* is widely attributed to Jeffery Dahmer’s influence, the fictitious journal through which we read the tale is very reminiscent of gruesome, verbatim confessions of an actual child murderer’s journal (Oates 1995). His name is Westley Allan Dodd and his journals and thoughts are revealed in a book he wrote himself with a ghost writer, *When the Monster Gets Out of the Closet*: “By Monday, I was frustrated. I was eager for ‘my first kill,’ but after two days had ‘come up empty.’ I didn’t really believe in Satan and had never considered joining a cult or anything like that, but I thought ‘it couldn’t hurt – who knows?’ I wrote up a ‘contract’ with Satan and told him he could have my soul if he’d help me find boys and get away with my crimes” (3).

Despite the difficulty of reading such violence, predecessors like *Story of the Eye* by Georges Bataille, *Justine* by Marquis De Sade, and Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* use overt language of descriptive violence. This ferocious style by other writers was contemplated during the writing process, but in the end, it seemed completely counterproductive to the book’s wider capabilities on social commentary. Furthermore, when *Only the Eyes* was critiqued in its early stages, it was suggested that some audience members would outright abandon the book entirely. Although as a consensus, the violence is better alluded to than magnified like the rape and seduction in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov or the kidnapping and starvation of the victim in the *The Corn Madien* by Joyce Carol Oates, some instances of descriptive violence did find their way into *Only the Eyes*. The
purpose is to lull and then frighten or to play with the emotions of the audience. Although over-the-top violence seemed to be the main goal in Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse*, complete isolation of certain audience members is no one’s goal nor is it likely to happen with *Only the Eyes* (Brite 1997). So many other aspects of the story and their revolving chapters far outnumber and outweigh any damage that might be caused by the few graphic scenes of carnage. Nevertheless, the inescapable violence in reality is a theme in the book, as the protagonist points out to his hosts that it can’t be ignored or wished away.

In keeping the audience on their toes, an homage is paid to Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amante Anglaise* for its unorthodox delivery. It left a lasting impression on how *Only the Eyes* was to operate, for the entire book is written as the transcripts of tape-recorded conversations with a female murderer, her husband, and one of her friends:

---You have confessed to the murder of your cousin, Marie-Therese Bousquet.
---Yes.
---You also admitted that you had no accomplice.
-----
---You did it all by yourself?
---Yes.
---You still say your husband knew nothing about what you’d done?
---Nothing at all. I took the pieces away during the night while he slept. He never woke up. I don’t know what you want (Duras 83).

So, great was this book, not for its plot or mystery, but for its development of the murderous character through the husband, the bartender, and the killer herself, that it greatly imparted its influence of format in one of the chapters that features an interrogation in the novel. Duras’ experimental book, completely devoid of intrusive prose, proves that it is not necessary when portraying actual recorded transcripts. The conversations speak completely for themselves and no outside narration of any kind is wanted or needed.
Part of *Only the Eyes*’ universal appeal is its self-perpetuating attempt to be universally appealing, i.e. to extend internationally beyond American borders. As mentioned before, the book almost feels like a petulant tattle-tale, but the purpose of many books is to stir controversy and make people wonder about the truth like *Only the Eyes* is attempting to do. Fundamentally, the plot of an unknown murderer at large lends itself to a Western-hemisphere readership. Crime is a mainstay of our country’s insatiable appetite after all, but the novel takes advantage of our globally-shrunken world by setting the plot in a foreign country many people have heard about but very few know. As inspiration, many crime-thriller authors were explored to inspect how not just the genre, but how crime itself functions in foreign countries and how they are explored through the pages of foreign authors. One such professional, Lars Kepler (a pseudonym of a husband-wife novelist team), sets *The Rabbit Hunter* in the authors’ native Sweden. *Only the Eyes* pilfers from these writers of international pop-fiction acclaim and expands upon two of Kepler’s tactics – use of perspective and minimal imagery. Primarily, the unique quality of *The Rabbit Hunter* is the pace set by the close, third-person perspective written in an immediate present tense. Never does one realize the rote cadence of most prose until a book like Lars Kepler’s is experienced. The rapidity of the book’s verb tense creates a stage-direction texture that mimics a camera’s rolling point of view, trailing quickly alongside the characters. Furthermore, the tense and terse third-person P.O.V. barks at the reader, almost ordering one to follow, just over the character’s shoulders. Of course, not every chapter in *Only the Eyes* reads in present tense; however, some do and the others read in tenses that best deliver the proper tone and mood for that particular chapter. For example, an early chapter from the killer’s point of view is written in a choppy, punctuation-less style, conveying a fragmented, anxious mind as the killer prepares for the hunt.
This style couples well with the other aspect gleaned from Kepler – the aforementioned bare-bones descriptions. This is not to say the reader is lost, looking for visuals to grasp on to. On the contrary, there are plenty of lines which set the place and atmosphere; however, there is absolutely no place in Kepler’s style for poetics. They are just not there; they are not necessary and are not missed. This minimalism might seem guileless, but this self-imposed artlessness begets its own style, its own art. It appeals to the audience member who reads to get in and get out of a book as quickly as possible, such as, “Two Security Police officers walk over to the young woman Saga handcuffed. Her eyes are red from crying, and her mascara has run down her temple” (Kepler, 35). Again, not every chapter of Only the Eyes employs this style; however, it does approach this technique in some chapters. The book does, on the other hand, fully embrace The Rabbit Hunter’s use of chapter brevity. With the longest chapter being ten pages or so, the average length is less than seven pages. As Only the Eyes emulates, The Rabbit Hunter’s succinct chapters sometimes beggar reason. They seem to end exactly where the next chapter continues, leading us to question, why not just continue with the narrative thread through a longer chapter? As possible justification, the chapter’s length contributes to the staccato writing style by creating snapshots. By which, the reader is almost tricked by the style into reading just one more chapter, just one more, perhaps one, tiny chapter more, until the book has all but flown by.

Therefore, The Rabbit Hunter literally minces no words, which applies to Only the Eyes in the matter of both its foreign setting and the multiple perspectives employed throughout the book. Foremost, The Rabbit Hunter, a book about a highly trained special forces operative bent on avenging a childhood trauma, proves that the foreign setting itself is not a character in any semblance, completely unlike Only the Eyes. Its Scandinavian backdrop plays little importance to the story, which teaches that the overseas locale is there, but it’s certainly not the books intention
in highlighting the crimes. One would assume that the feeling that crimes portrayed in *The Rabbit Hunter* could happen anywhere seems to play towards a larger English-speaking demographic in order to generate sales. On the contrary, *Only the Eyes* seeks to benefit from the exoticness of its Arabian setting, considering it is a much more curious and perplexing anomaly than any country in Western civilization, like Sweden. In *Only the Eyes* the setting very much becomes a juggernaut character, igniting the book’s larger themes of nationalism vs. patriotism, religious sanctimoniousness vs. Islamophobia, and the politics and hopelessness that envelops a fish-out-of-water character, like the protagonist Del Toro, a foreigner in a foreign land. A photonegative of *Only the Eyes* is Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*. Whereas the Chinese-American father in this book wrangles with their daughter’s murder in an American culture where he has never fit it, the protagonist in *Only the Eyes* is a Mexican-American who didn’t always fit in himself in his home country of the United States (Ng). The outcast state the protagonist feels seems to bring him closer to a nationalism he never knew he had, while conversely playing into his vices as a hedonistic American, struggling to do his job in a theocratic monarchy he knows virtually nothing about.

We’ve established where *Only the Eyes* founded its skeletal structure, its working mechanics – the chapters and how they are meant to pay homage to the predecessors that influenced them – but what of the main character, what of the protagonist? From where does he come and what does he bring to the literary table? Firstly, the exchanges we see with Ramon Del Toro are meant, as we discussed earlier, to be both familiar and foreign. He holds the characteristics and familial benefits and trappings of any human, deeming him relatable while still being superhuman and heroic. Obviously, detectives are the closest things we have to comic book avengers. Initially, Del Toro was meant to be a generic lawman because his inner life was expected
to have no bearing on the plot of the murder investigation. As the story progressed, it became apparent that his personal life with his wife and his own shortcomings and foibles couldn’t escape the author’s autobiographical experiences with being a Latino minority in America. Specifically, the character is dismayed and finds humor when he is taken as some kind of “other” by his W.A.S.P.-y ex-boss, making him attractive and worthy of distinction to her despite her seat of power over him. Nevertheless, Del Toro must come to terms with the fact that he is a minority in his country of birth, a minority when he was in the field of law enforcement, and as literary figure. Although the protagonist never felt the constraint of racial politics on himself throughout his life, considering he always felt competent and competitive in all his endeavors, he does realize it is a thing. Racial politics do exist and have bearing on him even if just a little and even if he was previously unaware as a child. Only after Del Toro visits the classist society of the United Arab Emirates does he truly experience his role as a privileged global citizen and his place as a minority in his own hierarchical society.

Consequently, much of the realism captured by Del Toro’s interactions throughout the book stem from the dialogue’s nomenclature and from Del Toro’s involvement in an interracial relationship with his white wife. The few instances where Del Toro’s race is noticeable parallel the similar interactions that the hardnosed gumshoe, Detective Lieutenant Sam Delaguerra experiences in Raymond Chandler’s short story, “Spanish Blood.” Raymond Chandler is considered a master of pulp fiction, and to read his work is to instantly recognize the trench coat-wearing, film-noir dicks that we know from 1940’s movie characters, sharply dressed in slacks and a tie, fedora dipped to conceal the eyes. Film-noir and Chandler’s characters boast an endearing-yet-dated slang and a stylized speaking inflection which sounds maudlin and melodramatic to us now. While our Del Torro dons his suit and tie and speaks the educated lingo
of a psychologist and criminologist while on the job, his true nature is revealed when he is not on
the clock, when he is speaking to his wife, his new friend, Alan, or even when he inadvertently
guffaws at unexpected breaks in the case. Then, the nomenclature of our own time pokes through.
Not to imply that the character is using current trendy speech like “being woke” or “feeling
ghosted” or “that’s so random;” however, his conversational speech does make him accessible as
an Everyman the same way Chandler’s characters would have been accessible to his
contemporaries in the 40’s. In “Spanish Blood,” Det. Lt. Delaguerra is never described as being
Latino; instead, he is nicknamed “Spanish” by one of the characters deep into the story. At one
point, Delaguerra feels it necessary to say, “My blood is Spanish, pure Spanish. Not nigger-Mex
and not Yaqui-Mex. My grandfather would have handled a situation like this with fewer words
and more powder smoke.” There, he draws attention to his ethnicity because it “…never counted
for anything on the job” until it does; that is, until his ethnicity calls into question his allegiance to
bad associates from the past, which he feels are being applied to him through racism (Chandler, 40).
Similarly, Del Toro doesn’t feel his ethnicity has ever been an issue; however, we are made
aware of its significance in the book both through his Hispanic name and when he, himself, feels
he’s been treated like an exotic by the white power structure in his line of work and again when
his Arab hosts question whether he is American at all. Nevertheless, the race of the character in
Only the Eyes is solely meant to add dimension to the character and not be a focal issue or a
grandstand opportunity.

Furthermore, Del Toro is an arm-chair sleuth based on real investigators whose jobs are to
hunt and capture villains. On the flipside of the coin, the antagonist, the Alleyman – as he is coined
by fictitious newspapers – is based on real homicidal maniacs. Therefore, much research was put
into what a real criminal profiler does to capture real psychopaths. Offender Profiling: An
*Introduction to the Sociopsychological Analysis of Violent Crime* is a research dissertation on the reliability of criminal profiling. As the research shows, not everyone gets behind the methods created and offered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, simply because some people just don’t believe in it. This happens in *Only the Eyes* as well when they question Del Toro profile and walk out of his seminars. The basic premise behind developing a profile is that “…even though the personality of an individual changes somewhat throughout life, the basic traits and patterns of behavior, originally a response to a specific repetitive situation, generally remain the same. Indeed, this is the fundamental idea behind profiling” (Palermo and Kacosis, 16). The developers of profiling seek to use this information to recognize a suspect when they come across him or her or to steer the investigation in the direction of the most likely unknown suspect. Like the entire field of psychology and psychiatry, much of it is subjective because we can only study a person’s mind or personality to a certain extend. The scientific research into one’s thoughts, words, and reactions will always be individual and subject to change and/or manipulation. For instance, the research collected by the F.B.I. in compiling their database of information on which their profiling program is based is, of course, subjective to whether the captured criminals they interviewed were being honest in their answers to begin with. Furthermore, one flaw in their study of violent criminal is that it is all based on those criminals which have been apprehended. As *Profiling Offenders* suggests, what about those that never answer for their crimes? How can we study their reactions to situations if they were clever enough to have never been caught? These doubts come through in *Only the Eyes* as the Emiratis are bitter and reluctant to be dealing with a ‘Western’ evil, to feel the need to seek outside help, and to be at the mercy to an unsubstantiated technique being forced upon them by a foreigner.
All things considered, *Only the Eyes* was conceived through my love of crime mysteries and thrillers, but in wanting to push the boundary in these age-old genres, the final product became more than a straightforward, linear tale of murder and mayhem. Instead, a comprehensive knowledge of a Middle Eastern country was combined with a similar expertise in fictional crime stories to comment on larger social ills. Pointedly, the investigative protagonist, Ramon Del Toro, with all of his indulgences and character flaws, symbolizes the oft overreaching influence of America as self-appointed world-dominator and savior. The antagonist, being two-fold as the killer and the setting, is more complicated. The murderous Alleyman represents greed, hedonism, and gluttony in its basest form, as the evil-doer takes simply what he wants for the purpose of satisfying himself. This speaks to the state of our current generation bent on fulfilling themselves and seeking fame as they do it. The aforementioned setting as antagonist represents another flawed Utopia in our world that has yet to figure out how best to live. Its desert climes belie the sparkling world it hopes to achieve but never can because of its very nature. Instead, it attempts to skip the necessary hard work and grit that forges a country’s history by making others do it for them. Which brings us to the next figurative players in the novel – the victims. The victims are still the victims, symbolically and literally in our book. As they are getting murdered because of their oblivious pursuit of betterment and happiness, they are struck down by the uncaring characters in the book and the world at large. As they are murdered for fun by the killer, they show how meaningless life is to the selfish world around them. If we consider their gender and their skin color, we can’t deny that they reflect the reality that has oppressed and abused women and people of color for millennia on end. Finally, as a means of venting these frustrating observations, they have been present here in the entertaining format of a novel which diligently relied on canons and trailblazes in the crime thriller genre as it’s guide.
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ONLY THE EYES: A NOVEL
Chapter 1

(Abu Dhabi International Airport - Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates)

I always thought I could write my way out of anything, yet here I was, seven-thousand miles away from home, written into a corner. People warned me the contract was too good to be true. When the visa they promised me didn’t come right away, everyone thought I had been scammed, but when it finally did, I thought, *Who’s laughing now?* Turns out they were right; I was given the old three-card Monte—*find the lady, find the lucky lady, find the lucky lady*, the ol’ bait-and-switch. Never think you can follow the lucky lady because eyes play tricks.

I knew something was wrong the second I stepped off the plane in Abu Dhabi. I was told I would be presenting some guest-lectures at New York University-Abu Dhabi with a chance to plug my latest book at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, should I decide to stay that long, but when I exited the gangway, I was greeted by a policeman and an officious-looking gentleman dressed in the Middle-Eastern tradition of a white *kandura* a matching *ghutra* on his head. They instantly spotted me among the crowd of beleaguered passengers, but my troubled concentration fell on the police officer. I started to envision myself rotting in a foreign prison for a crime I might have never had the pleasure of committing. My mind quickly flipped through the few things I had learned about the country before I had left and tried to figure out what I had done wrong. Maybe some of my wife’s psychotropic pills for her anxiety made their way into my toiletry bag? They’re illegal here. Or maybe the curse of being sacked from law enforcement had ruined my chances again before they even breathed to life.

I tried to play it cool and relied on my training from the past. Assessing the situation with a deep sigh, I was no longer the hack writer I had become; I reverted to the Special Agent of my younger self. My senses heightened. My heart thrashed about, trying to break free and go home,
but my breathing stayed even. I regained control of my functions and tried to look pleasantly surprised at their presence, but not worried.

As stern as the gentlemen and his police escort looked at first, the traditionally dressed Emirati presented a relaxed smile and raised his hand in greeting, while the officer remained stoic and stiff. This did nothing to assuage the feeling that I had somehow been tricked into coming here. This was no book tour. This was a set-up.

I thought maybe they had the wrong guy, so I said, “I’m Ramon Del Toro.” They didn’t introduce themselves, but the head Emirati said persuasively, “Yes, sir, we know. Please follow us.”
Chapter 2

(Recent Past – Al Ain Golf, Rugby, Equestrian Club and Shooting Range – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

Though Anna has read it a dozen times, the note seems to scream through her pocket. She finds comfort in fingering its tattered edge. She opens wide the door, lighting up the tiny room, fifteen-by-fifteen square feet at most. There are two, narrow, single beds, like children sleep here, but she’s grown used to it. As a privacy barrier between them stands a full-length wardrobe with mirrors on the doors which reflect more sunshine around their hovel. Waitress uniforms on wire hangers fight for space against the cheap dresses they used love wearing when they shared the same day off. That was a long time ago. Now, their one-day-off-a-week never seems to overlap.

All the uniforms that say Anna are on the left; the ones that say Prissy are on the right. The official name printed on Anna’s red passport is Diwata, but that’s too hard for Westerners to grasp. So, her supervisor handed her a shoebox full of old nametags when she arrived for her first day of work five years ago at the Rugby Club and said, “Pick one.”

She chose, Anna.

She rakes through a tray of makeup they share, which is something her mother back home told her never to do – share makeup. She picks a color of lipstick that would be inappropriate at work and begins to apply it seductively in the mirror. Filipino Pop music mumbles through the bathroom door as her roommate, Prissy, takes a shower. Anna inches closer to her own reflection and can’t avoid the little photograph tucked into the corner of mirror.

Uggh, don’t look at me like that, Piolo.

She snatches the photograph up and creases it in half, folding her children’s father out of the picture. Only her three kids are visible now, so she tucks it back into the mirror frame.
She talks to it, “I’ve been waiting for you to get a job here, too, Piolo.” She waits till Prissy starts singing in the shower to make sure she’s really alone. Then, she addresses the snapshot again, “I’m not going to sleep with him, Piolo.”

She laughs and Prissy suddenly stops singing. She lowers her voice, “Well, if I do...I won’t enjoy it. I promise.” She blows a kiss at the mirror, disgusted, but not knowing who or what she’s angry at the most.

Prissy bursts out of their tiny bathroom without a towel. Anna hates when she walks around naked, feels like she’s throwing it in her face that she has a better body. Prissy snaps the waistband of her panties around her hips and shimmies into her skirt. They can’t stand wearing the uniform. It looks like a flight attendant outfit for an African airline from the 1970’s.

Prissy asks in their native tongue, “Were you talking to me?” She rummages through the vanity drawer over Anna’s shoulder for a pair of earrings.

“No, I was just...you know...cursing myself,” she replies. They speak English at the restaurant, but here in their dormitory they speak Tagalog.

“What for?” Prissy gives up searching and rushes away when she notices Anna is wearing the earrings she wanted.

“I burned myself,” Anna lies, looping the curling iron through the ends of her flat, black hair.

“I can’t believe you still go out on your days off,” Prissy says, standing behind her, still topless, “I’m always too tired. I just want to stay in bed all day.”

“I have an important date,” Anna says temptingly.

“Oh really? With Robert from the Golf Club?”

“Tsk,” she sucks her teeth, says, “No way” in English. It says what she wants in English.
Prissy gets the hint to stop prying and rolls her eyes. Just then the employee golf cart beeps the horn, and Anna watches through the open door as other waitresses in uniform rush from their dorm rooms and squeeze together for a ride to work.

“Well, take care,” Prissy says, waiting for a reply, “I have a double, so I’ll see you when... who knows...when I see you, I guess.” Anna’s too busy putting on her face so Prissy steps into the afternoon, screaming in high-pitched Tagalog for the golf cart to wait for her.

Anna gets up and shuts the door, dropping the room into darkness. The illumination of the vanity bulbs is the only light source once the curtains are drawn.

Addressing the picture again with a pouty face, “I won’t have fun. Really, I won’t. It won’t be anything special,...but if it is...Oh, if it is, if it is...” She gets up and twirls around, then bounces back and forth from bed to bed, like she and her brothers used to do when they were kids. Their father would take them to a hotel once in while in Manilla when the monsoons threatened to drown their house in mud. Her parents would be worried sick, but she and her brothers beat those beds to death until their dad took off his flipflop and cried *enough!*

When is there ever enough?

To satisfy herself that it’s still there, she takes out the receipt with the handwritten note, reads it once more, then puts it back in her pocket to keep it quiet.
Chapter 3

(Abu Dhabi International Airport - Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates)

In the flood of disembarking passengers, we made an awkward plug, standing in the middle of the gangway. The two Emiratis said, “As-salaam-alaikum,” while my fellow travelers glanced at us curiously and annoyed, surging around us as best they could with the carry-on bags in tow.

I replied, “Wa-alaikum-salaam,” which they didn’t seem to expect.

“Oh, so you know some Arabic?” the Emirati gentlemen said.

“Well, I know that you said, ‘Peace be upon you,’ and I said, ‘And may peace be upon you,’ or something along those lines, right?” I asked as light-heartedly as possible, hoping my fears and worries were misconstrued.

They weren’t.

They shuffled me to the front of the line, past the same exhausted people I had just rubbed elbows with for the past fourteen hours on our direct flight to the front of the line. Immigration collected my fingerprints with a laser scanner and the irises of my eyes with a little optical machine, which my chaperones said was customary for all long-term arrivals. Then, they skipped me ahead of another gawking queue where I watched my two chaperones make pleasantries with the customs agents who were similarly robed in a kanduras. The customs agent handling me, who seemed so lively just before, talking to his own people, then turned to me, stone-faced. He stared at me intimidatingly, trying to rectify who the young person in the photograph taken nearly ten years before had he gone. Satisfied it was indeed me, he adhered a pink visa inside my passport on the spot and pounded it with the resounding click of his official stamp. My Emirati escort explained this was not normal, but special arrangements had been made for my arrival.

Once we had made our way through the airport ringer and stepped outside, the humidity of thousand swamps hit me like a dragon’s breath. I noticed my two hosts were handling the weather
much better than me. The traditionally dressed gentleman didn’t seem to be suffering at all. He was very tall, fit, and handsome with an immaculately trimmed beard and exuding the scent of a fine, high-priced cologne. There, he finally introduced himself and said, “I’m Detective Khalifa Saeed Al Shamsi. Marhabah - welcome.”

The other officer didn’t offer his name, and Detective Khalifa Saeed introduced him so dismissively that I quickly forgot his name. We all shook hands formally, and I got the impression that either the accompanying officer’s English wasn’t very good, or perhaps I was supposed to think the assisting officer was just that, an assisting officer, and of no importance compared to Detective Khalifa Saeed.

Parked directly in front of where the taxis were lined up was a black Mercedes, surrounded by police cars with their red-and-blue, emergency lights on. It seemed the entirety of India and Pakistan – along with their families – were at the airport, eyeballing me in perplexity, wondering why I was so special, and I wondered right along with them.

Once I was being chauffeured around, I started to get an inkling of where this might be headed. And despite the celebrity treatment I was receiving, I knew none of this was good. I remembered the newspaper article I read on the airplane, and I opened my newly stamped passport to check the status of my visa. I saw the title listed under occupation didn’t say Lecturer or Writer. It didn’t say Professor or Teacher, Instructor, or Author. No. It said Private Consultant. Coincidentally, I had torn out the article and tucked it into the inside breast pocket of my jacket because it was related to my line of work, and considering my present company, I was hard-pressed to keep from taking a second read now. That nagging suspicion was right. It had everything to do with the article, and I had been Shanghaied, almost literally. Except I wasn’t sent off on a slow boat to China, I was jet-set to the hatchling nation of the United Arab Emirates. I couldn’t protest
that none of this was my fault. Just as I had pulled myself from the noose before, I landed in a beartrap, again.
Chapter 4

(Recent Past – Desert Wilderness outside Al Ain, U.A.E.)

An Emirati man with a beard as thick as carpet follows his son, up one dune, down another, his dark, blue, winter *kandura* flagging in the cool dawn breeze but keeping him warm enough. He has no shoes on his feet, and the sand is frigid in the mornings. He has a *ghutra* wrapped around his head held tight against the wind with a black *agal* holding the cloth to his skull like a crown. When he summits the furrowed sand ridge, the horizon pierces his eyes. He lowers his head to let the brunt of his eyebrows shield the sun. While the distance between him and his son has increased, the length between the boy and his falcon has gotten smaller. Their skinny *saluki* pulls at his leash and whines to be set free, but the man holds him short.

He calls in Arabic, “Don’t let her get too far ahead.” He grimaces and shakes his head as the falcon continues to tease the boy along, further into the desert, away from their Nissan Patrol. He looks back to find it, but it has long been swallowed below the swells of the sand, no longer visible.

His son, now a black dot in the daybreak turns back and cries, “I got her. She’s not far,” but the man can only hear the wind before he sees his son dip below the next ridge.
Chapter 5
(Fairmont Bab Al Bahr Hotel – Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

The silent officer took the driver’s seat, Detective Khalifa Saeed rode shotgun, and I sat in the back, like an ambassador. I was impressed with the ride through Abu Dhabi, despite much of the city by the airport consisting of sand and half-constructed projects, whereas, other parts were modern displays of luxury hotels and high-rises, tree-lined and landscaped with green lawns and flowers. I had read about this country rising out of the desert over the last fifty or so years, but I still knew nothing of how first-world it would be or how Draconian the Sharia Law would manifest itself on daily life, if at all. As we got closer to the heart of the city, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque became visible through the passenger side windows in all its gleaming, white glory. Although I read it was constructed entirely of marble, it looked soft in the hazy distance, as if constructed of chalk or marshmallow. Across the neon-lit bridge of the same name sprawled the Fairmount Bab Al Bahr Hotel along with a string of sister resorts to its left and right. The Mercedes pulled up to the valet and parked it haphazardly in the mouth of the hotel’s entrance. The concierge sped over to wave away the parking attendant’s offer to move the black Mercedes out of the way; he didn’t know who we were, but he knew at, the very least, we were somebody. Somebody important.

Inside, the lobby was luxurious; it, too, made of marble, except entirely black instead of the Grand Mosque’s white. Detective Khalifa Saeed accompanied me right past the check-in counter, towards the glass elevator where he handed me a key card and said, “Get settled in your room. There is a SIM card waiting for you on the desk, and a schedule. Someone will call you tomorrow to pick you up around 8:30 in the morning.” With this, I assumed Detective Khalifa Saeed was going to leave me on my own, but he didn’t.
We entered the elevator together, and I pushed the fourth-floor button, assuming the number 402 written in pen on the card sleeve implied my room was on the fourth floor. I thought, *there’s something you don’t see in America anymore – a room number written on your hotel key so anyone who might find it can walk straight into your room and rob your blind*, but the elevator didn’t work. Det. Khalifa Saeed told me to hold the key card up to the floor-number panel, which I did before the fourth-floor button finally lit up when pressed. I was embarrassed more than surprised at the modernity of my new digs and said, “Whoa, this sure beats La Quinta Inn, huh?”

“I’m sorry?” Detective Khalifa Saeed said, confused.

“Oh, nothing...it’s just a famous hotel chain in America.”

We exited the elevator, and the view of the pool and the resort grounds out the corridor windows were spectacular but nothing compared to the Grand Mosque that sat across the ocean inlet opposite the hotel.

Detective Khalifa Saeed said, “We have many American hotel chains here, but I don’t think we have that one.”

“No, God, no. I hope not,” I stopped in front of 402 and extended my hand again. “Thank you, sir.” I was petrified the detective might ask to come in and shoot the shit, so I added, “You’ve been quite gracious.”

To my great relief, he said, “I’m sure you need some rest.”

“Yes, I do, and I need to call my wife. Thank you so much.”

We shook hands again, and I was about to close my door, when I stopped him halfway down the hallway and said, “I sure would appreciate it if someone explained to me what’s going on tomorrow?”
“Yes, Mr. Ramon, I was instructed to make you comfortable tonight, and everything will be explained to your satisfaction tomorrow.” What could I say? They had me. They dragged me this far, and I was so desperate to be a mover and a shaker that I had let them. I had to trust them for now. At least, the police weren’t there to arrest me. They needed me.

Behind the sanctity of my closed door, I fell into my luxurious bed on my back and within minutes I fell asleep without taking off my clothes or calling my wife, Amanda.
Chapter 6

(Recent Past – Desert Wilderness outside Al Ain, U.A.E.)

Suddenly, the Emirati boy’s face bobs above the dune hill again. He has his father’s leather gauntlet on one arm that’s much too big. Waving, the boy shouts in Arabic, “She’s got something; she’s got something! Come quick!”

The man begins a light trot, but the saluki pulls him faster than he can handle down the slope. He lets out the slack of the leash to the end of its tether and yells to his boy, “Hurry, son, before she picks it clean. She’s not trained well enough!” Then, he mutters under his breathe, “Neither is this dumb dog.”

A short distance from the Peregrine falcon, the boy slows, gingerly crouches, and raises up the gauntlet as a signal for the bird to come. The falcon reluctantly flies and digs his talons into the leather, perching there as she’s been trained. The boy smiles at her obedience, quickly produces a morsel from his kandura pocket, and feeds it to the falcon as a distraction. *Always distract a hunter if don’t want it to peck out your eyes.* Then, he deftly cups the falcon’s head from behind in one swift motion with a tiny, leather hood, securing it single-handedly with a pull string. The Emirati boy rises to inspect what the bird has tracked down.

Over the horizon of the dune, boy’s father hears a piercing scream. He lets go of the saluki, and scrambles up the shifting sand on all fours, feet and hands sinking into the grade. The dog goes lengthening up the hill effortlessly and disappears. As the he reaches the top, his son slams into him, knocking him to the desert floor.

The boy stammers, terrified, “*Haram, haram!*” – Sinful, evil – pointing where the falcon has gone back to dab away at something in the dirt. It alights at the last second as the saluki artlessly barges into the falcon’s trove.
“It’s not a rabbit, dad!” his son says in Arabic. Leaving his boy behind, the man continues to run towards the spot where the dog is nosing and pawing in the dirt.

“Yahla, get away from there, stupid dog!” he says, lashing out at the gangly pup with the agal he has ripped off the top of his head; he whips at the stubborn dog until the makeshift-whip snaps its hindquarters.

Looking down, it takes him a second to recognize what he is looking at. The desiccated face of woman lies below him, and he realizes he must be standing on the rest of her buried body. A scream peals from him as he reels back in terror. He turns to run but allows himself one more glance over his shoulder to make sure he is truly witnessing what his mind can’t comprehend. Evil. Sinful. His son was right, haram, haram. He forces himself to go back and take another look at what Evil has wrought.

He can see long black hair. Her flesh is grey and sunken to her skull. In the voiceless scream of her mouth, sand has filled the cavity to her teeth. The falcon returns to peck at the face brazenly without a care for the man or the saluki that crowds it. The Emirati man takes the opportunity to cover the falcon with his ghutra while yanking away the dog by the collar at the same time. It hurts to take one parting look at the girl in the sand as he stumbles away.

He makes note of the expanse around him, tries to estimate the location of his truck and the city in their respective distances. He looks up at the sky and say in Arabic, “Allah akbar!” – God is great! If she could see, she would be looking up at the sky, but where the eyes should be are sunken slits of dried skin filled with the silica of the surrounding landscape.
Chapter 7

Del Toro reads the *New York Tribune* article, which can be found in Appendix 1.
Chapter 8

(Recent Past - Somewhere in the U.A.E.)

This is your place – you are alone here – no one can bother you – the hatch is secure – you can turn on the light and see you’ve become the Sight To End All Sights – you’ve accepted it – not everyone can be the face of humanity – someone has to be the backside – someone has to be the loins – the muck filled intestines – you’ve tried a long time to be like them but are different – not a complete anomaly – there have been others like you – there are others like you now somewhere – how futile to believe we can all be godly – someone has to be born on the other side – you tried not to let it be this way but you cannot deny it anymore – others have come before you they have accepted who they are just as you have – you read about their capitulation in their confessions – they admitted that they acquiesced to what they were destined to be – there is no sense denying it – you’ve stepped over the line – there’s no going back – you are alone in that sense – you can never confide in anyone ever again – you’re an immense secret – your entire being is underground – you’ve tried to be like the others – tried to be different from who you are – tried to change – you listened to them preach to you – advise you – scold you – demand of you – listened to them talk about you – learned how to hide – learned how to blend in among them – you’ve practiced and practiced – you’re proud of yourself by how far you’ve come – how much you’ve accomplished in your new endeavor – no more dreaming and wishing – no more lusting and fanaticizing – no more failed attempts – you have made it all real now – you’ve done what so many others want to do but not cannot commit – now lay out your tools as a reminder – as an endorsement – you’ve planned and schemed about it long enough – tonight you go out anew
Ramon Del Toro jolts awake at the sound of the hotel phone ringing on the nightstand. Momentarily, he doesn’t know where he is. He stretches and fumbles the receiver to answer it, saying, “Yes, sir. I will be ready.” Before he knows it, the doorbell chimes, and the two Emiratis from the airport are in the hallway, waiting to take him somewhere.

“Morning gentlemen,” he says with seriousness, like a drill sergeant, considering he’s no longer working with the Literati and has somehow found his way back in the regimented realm of law enforcement – a place of solemnity where he questioned his belonging the first time around.

“As-salaam-alaikum. Sabat al’hair,” Detective Khalifa Saeed says.

Del Toro is stumped by encountering more Arabic than he can handle, “Wah’lakem salam. Sorry, that’s all I know.”

“Ah, the other part just means, Good morning, Mr. Ramon.”

“Great, I’ll try to remember that. Hey, not that it really matters because I don’t care either way, but I’ve noticed that a lot of people are calling me Mr. Ramon here.”

“Yes?”

“It’s just that normally I would be called by my last name, Mr. Del Toro.”

“Well, I, too, will try to remember that, Mr. Del Toro.”

“So, should we grab some breakfast?” Del Toro suggests. The two Emirati gentlemen look at each other, askance.

Detective Khalifa Saeed speaks up, “Ah…I’m sorry. Did you not eat already? Breakfast is included with your stay.”

“Oh no, I thought we’d grab something together on the way to…to…wherever you’re taking me.”
“We’re…fasting,” the two gentlemen stammer uncomfortably, as if Del Toro should have known this instinctively or at least should have been informed, “It’s Ramadan. Public eating is not allowed, but for non-Muslims, you can eat in your room. Or they have curtained-off areas in certain hotels, like this one.”

“Oh, my goodness, that’s right! My apologies.”

Del Toro and the Emiratis exit the elevator into the lobby and start leading him down the hallway towards the conference wing.

Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “We will arrange a breakfast for you over here.”

“So…wait a second…you’re going to explain to me what going on now, right?” Del Toro asks.

“Let’s step inside this conference room, and I’m sure you’ll understand the significant changes we’ve made to your visa.”

“I’d say.”

“Mr. Del Toro, as you know you were invited here to take part in a series of discussion about your true crime books,” he snapped his fingers and the other officer handed him a small stack of his books, “The Inconsolable Killer, The Devil You Don’t Know, and, Mr. Del Toro, this one we are most interested in for a specific chapter, Morbid Parade: A Collection of the Most Perverse Sexual Sadists.”

Being in the company of devotees who bow their heads to the floor in supplication before their God five times a day makes Del Toro blush slightly at the titles being recited out loud. He still wasn’t convinced that he might find himself on plane back home, unemployed, and branded immoral, offensive, or obscene by an entire country. And if so, could such a label land him in jail here? Nevertheless, he stood his ground, waiting for what they might say of his work, knowing
his research was sound, knowing the segment of society he explored truly existed and couldn’t be
wished away.

Detective Khalifa Saeed took a seat at the large conference table next to Del Toro while
the other officer remained vigilant, much like he had done the day before. The detective spoke
quietly for a moment to the waiting officer, who quickly turned heels and left the room. Then, he
leaned in so close to his captive audience that Del Toro caught the scent of that exquisite fragrance,
and the detective said, “We have done a lot of research about you.”

Knowing the scandal that got him terminated from the Federal Bureau of Investigation
when he was just a young agent and well aware it stemmed from a character flaw he hadn’t yet
mastered in his wiser years, Del Toro shifted minutely in his seat.

Detective Khalifa Saeed continued, “We’ve spoken to the Ministry of Culture and Youth
and…”

Del Toro interrupted, “I’m sorry, you’ve spoken to whom?”

“We’ve spoken to the Ministry of Culture and Youth, which is the department of our
government that was originally going to sponsor your work visa here.”

“Oh, okay, please, go on.”

“Yes, and we are prepared to offer you a much better arrangement we believe you might
be interested in.”

“And if I don’t like it, I can simply go back to the lectures I was going to give in preparation
for the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature?”

“Ahhh, it might…” Detective Khalifa Saeed looked relieved that the officer he had sent
away had come back with a bottle of water at a situation that appeared to be getting the better of
him, but he choose his head diplomatically, “As I was saying, it would be likely that we could
keep the previous arrangement, but considering we’ve already assumed sponsorship of your working visa…”

Del Toro quickly rifled through his pockets for his passport and flipped through the pages until he found the pink visa, which he skimmed and said, “Says here I’m sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior. Is that you?”

“Yes, that is the branch of government that covers us.”

“And by us, you mean the police department?”

“Yes, Mr. Del Toro, that’s correct.”

“I don’t get it. You want me to start a sort of Oprah’s Book Club with your officers and review my books?” he chuckled, trying to lighten the mood, but Detective Khalifa Saeed didn’t join in, neither did the other officer.

“I’m afraid your role would be a bit more serious than that, and that is why we must implore you to accept the new position we are offering you.”

“How serious are we talking here?”

“A matter of life and death, Mr. Del Toro, quick frankly.”

“Life and death, huh?”

“Yes, sir, we have recently discovered that we have a serious problem…”

“Oh, boy,” Del Toro said inaudibly.

“…within our borders…”

“Oh, no, I was right,” Del Toro mumbled.

“…that we don’t feel confident in solving…”

“This is about that New York Tribune article, isn’t it?”

“…with our limited experience in this kind of crime spree.”
“My God, with all due respect, Detective Khalifa Saeed, just come out and say it, please!”

“As you’ve just conveyed, you have read an article speculating that we have serial offender at work in our small country, and although we have dealt with many acts of terrorism and a serial killer for monetary gain, we have never experienced a sexual sadist of this nature before.”

As this had quickly become the longest conversation he had had with Detective Khalifa Saeed, Del Toro had assumed, perhaps in quite a racist manner, that his contacts here would be less proficient in English. However, Detective Khalifa Saeed seemed to have mastered the language so well, Del Toro assumed he had been educated in America or England, for the man had no more Arabic accent than his own slight regional accent from El Paso, Texas. Del Toro had paused long enough and finally said, “You know there are actual people in the F.B.I. that do this kind of thing, they’re called Criminal Psychologists. Profilers with Behavioral Science Department.”

“You resigned from the F.B.I., Mr. Del Toro, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” Del Toro replied, but didn’t think it would behoove him to elaborate.

“You were accepted into the Behavioral Science Unit, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but there’s a reason I’m not still there now. There’s a reason I never became what you seek right now.”

“And what is that reason?”

“Because…because…I am not F.B.I. material! I’m a hack writer! The reason is that all of this sounds serious. You’re right, this is life and death, and I can’t be responsible for that. I never could. I was too selfish. I had other priorities. Namely, myself!”

“We have spoken to your former Director…”

“You’ve spoken to Director Larissa Harrison?”
“Yes, and...”

“Lovely. Just, just dandy. She’s going to ruin my life again, isn’t she?”

“And she said that you were the most promising Special Agent they had at the time, that you would probably still make a promising agent.”

“With some of the jarheads and jocks I worked with, that ain’t saying much.”

“The point is, Mr. Del Toro, this is an Emirati problem, so we must solve it, in house. You would be working for us as an investigative consultant, a private agent, if you will, freelance. Of course, you will be held to the most stringent confidentiality contract. You are to work strictly with us, and any disclosure you make in the future about your involvement on this case will be vehemently denied by our government.”

“Let me make this as clear as I can, I. Have. Never. Caught. A. Serial. Killer.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Del Toro, but don’t you think you can?”
Chapter 10

(Somewhere in the U.A.E.)

A table you nailed together yourself – wood you brought down the hole piece by piece – you lay out your tools – your entire kit – all your make-up and clothes for tonight – first you approach the slender mirror to apply a base – to smooth out and soften your ugly skin – you hate the size of the mirror – it was the only full-length one that would fit down the hatch – the lighting down here is sparse – reprimand yourself for not improving it – you pencil in severely dark and angled eyebrows – outline your eyes with a broad stroke of glossy ink-black eyeliner – you apply a purplish eyeshadow on the lids – a slight hint of a silver sheen – you comb out your lashes – the most expensive mascara you could buy – it seals your lashes together and points them into triangular daggers – you use a lip-liner called Mauve Me Tender to make your lips fuller – you fill it in with Lovely Frappuccino lipstick – your cheekbones get a peachy pink blush called Apricot Shimmer – you admire yourself in the mirror – turn to the right then turn to the left – glance at yourself side-wise

At one end of the table are the zip-ties – they are black plastic – riot-gear military-grade with a metal tooth to lock in the strip – they cannot be undone by even the strongest hands when clasped behind the back – you have eight of them already circled together loosely – a snake eating its own tail – they are ready to be slipped on and zipped tight – you arrange them on top of each other like curls snipped off at the tips – next you take the khanjar out of its sheath – it impresses you every time you feel its heft – you admire its razor-sharp curve – how it slides back into its metal case – it is as sharp as anything on earth – it is designed to zip through hides – open up bellies – disembowel prey – it slits across a throat quick and painless as a shooting star – every stab sinks in so sweetly – you don’t even realize you’re inside until the body hits the hilt – you thumb the edge – shave off the ridges of your fingertips – your khanjar is a specimen – its metal
has passed through a thousand hands – handle carved from the ivory of a sperm whale washed ashore in Oman a hundred years ago or more – the top of the handle is silver shaped into the head of a *theeb* – its eyes are blood rubies that traveled across the Silk Road – it is one among many in your collection – this one is the most exemplary – you will treasure it forever and never give it away – till death do you part.
Chapter 11

(Fairmont Bab Al Bahr Hotel, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

“It was decided that you’d be more comfortable here, near your accommodations, so we provided a conference room where you will lead your seminars,” says Detective Khalifa Saeed.

The windows of the conference room are curtained off. On the walls are blank pegboards apparently installed just for him. On the table are neat rows of accordion folders labeled with the names of the victims that he recognizes from the dossier they gave him to read overnight. Del Toro walks over and flips through them quickly, finding more reports and photographs.

Del Toro says, “Gentlemen, this is all fantastic, just great, really, but I thought I was going to be inspecting evidence. First hand.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “I’m sorry, I thought it was clear you’d be providing seminars only?”

“Ok, I don’t mean to step on anyone’s toes here...,” Del Toro looks down at Khalifa Saeed’s feet protruding through his thousand-dollar sandals, “...but I mean, if you’re giving me this title as Investigative Consultant, then, I damn sure need to investigate before I can offer my advise.”

“You’ll have to talk to my supervisor. He...”

Steaming like a tea kettle, Del Toro says, “I left my wife and newborn to be here. I just read on the plane that you found a new victim less than forty-eight hours ago, so either put me back on the book tour circuit, where I planned to shirk my responsibilities, sipping margaritas, or take me to the crime scene!” The room suffocates with awkwardness, and Del Toro thinks maybe he’s oversold his display of initiative. Whereas he secretly wishes he might be sent back to the minor leagues at the Literary Festival, he couldn’t help but feel invigorated at being an investigator again. However, only an hour before, he had done everything he could to undersell his abilities to Detective Khalifa Saeed; now here he is throwing a fit, demanding more access, so he adds, “Look,
gentlemen, if you want me to take this seriously, you’ve got to let me go all in. If we want to catch this guy, I’ll show you how to get your hands dirty.”

The Emiratis suffuse with color, and it’s apparent they’re not used to such outbursts. He suddenly feels very American, loud and boisterous. After some deliberation though, Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “Which one?”

“What do mean, which one?” Del Toro asks in disbelief, “You’ve got another body?”

“Yes, just a few hours ago.”
Chapter 12

(Somewhere in the U.A.E.)

Your shoes are selected for comfort and agility – they are not womanly but spared no expense in buying them – money you stole from the purse of the last one – you want to be naked beneath the abaya – if you have to dispose of it on the street you must have something on underneath – you step into underwear with a padded bum – bought in an Asian market – you pull on black exercise leggings over the padded underwear – you slip your arms through an enormous stuffed bra – you stretch a long-sleeved Under Armor top over it – you lay out the abaya on the wooden table – check for any holes or runs in the fabric – the abaya is a long loose rayon polyester blend – you slip it on easily over your running outfit – if you stand up to your fullest height it hangs mid-shin – doesn’t look right – use your cane – stay slightly hunched – an old lady – your cane lies next to the khanjar on the table – it is dense mahogany from when slave traders and pirates came through the Gulf – if it fell in water it wouldn’t float – the end metal tipped – handle matches the khanjar – the head of a theeb – same growing snarl – same red bejeweled eyes – you’ve seen the eyes of the theeb in the mountains before – their eyes don’t glow red – they glow yellowish-green – you wish the eyes were emeralds instead – you love the cane anyway.
Chapter 13

(Desert Wilderness outside Al Ain, U.A.E.)

After a long drive, Del Toro finds himself in the heart of the United Arab Emirates, mid-May, encircled by endless desert. The walk to the crime scene from the Nissan Patrol, painted military camouflage, is the longest Del Toro has been outside in this environment thus far, and he’s pleasantly surprised that the weather’s not that unbearable, yet it’s still early.

Many looky-loos in various forms of attire are within the crime scene perimeter. They are dressed in everything from traditional, white *kanduras* to police and military regalia. Some are in suits and ties, like him, and they’re all milling about a good distance from the epicenter of the crime scene, which happens to be a flapping, canvas structure. It’s an Arabic-style tent; the kind he’s only seen in the movies. Del Toro and the two officers are summoned towards the black tent.

Some of the spectators are on their knees praying. Others are retching. All of them look pale and green with anguish. Many are grumbling something in Arabic and raising their palms to the sky. Del Toro recognizes the renowned expression of “*Allah akbar*,” but that is all he knows. Del Toro, red and sweating, now realizes how quickly the weather can ramp up when standing out in the direct sunlight. He leads the way as if he were still a Special Agent for the F.B.I. Detective Khalifa Saeed and his partner keep in stride with him through the sand. Despite the slip of his leather-soled dress shoes, he attempts to make the walk without looking too awkward and ill-prepared. This arduous trek reminds him of nightmares he’s had, running through a cloud, or sludge, getting nowhere.

As an agent on active duty, he had only visited a handful of murder scenes, so he’s not ready for the initial punch of the rotting, human flesh. He covers his face with the crux of his elbow when it hits him, and he hopes no one retches or he’ll probably throw up himself. When they finally reach the tent, he wants to approach the victim that’s hunched over in a prayer position,
but they have to wait for the medical examiner. The same protocol applies back home. They remain silent the entire time until Detective Khalifa Saeed nods towards the partner standing next to him, and sighs, “We are glad you’re here.” Del Toro knows they’re being sincere when he sees they’re both wearing the pinched looked of pain that comes from wanting to be anywhere but here, inhaling the indignant death of some unfortunate stranger.

Khalifa Saeed’s English is near perfect, but he reminds Del Toro that’s not the case for most.

Del Toro puts his hand on Detective Khalifa Saeed’s shoulder and leans in to confess, “Listen, I was actually bluffing when I told you guys to bring me out here. I’d rather be back at the hotel…or better yet…back home, but I’m glad you decided to bring me out here to get a feel of the place.”

“What do you mean, ‘bluffing.’”

“I was going to tell you all this when I gave my seminar, but many profiles would done strictly from crime scene photos. The F.B.I. get calls from departments all over the world, and they can’t visit every single scene, personally. That’s why it’s vital for these kinds of cases to have a great forensic photographer; even a videographer these days.”

“We don’t have a video person…but we all have cellphones,” Det. Khalifa Saeed says, and Del Toro doesn’t know if he’s supposed to take that as sarcasm or not.

Del Toro goes on, “It isn’t always advisable for investigators to get up close and personal with the victims. Oh no, in this line of work, it’s important that people investigating crime scenes like this keep themselves somewhat detached.”

“Detached from the case?”
“No, not detached from the case, just detached from the victims,” Detective Khalifa Saeed still looks confused, so Del Toro clarifies, “The best way to lose a good investigator down the neck of a bottle or down the barrel of his own gun is to put a dead body in front of him day-in-and-day-out that reminds him of his mom, his wife, or his sister, his daughter.”

“Ahh, I see.”

“Give me a good ol’ crime scene photo taken by a professional forensic photographer any day, that’s what I say.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed’s partner asks, “She-gu?” which Del Toro instantly understands as, What’d he say? The detective enlightens his partner in Arabic while they all put on their medical masks, blue shoe-cover booties, and rubber gloves.

Del Toro asks, “You sure those boys who found her didn’t move her?”

The other officer answers in broken English, “No, sir. They are scared, frightened. They know she was died.”

“How did they know that without moving her?” Del Toro asks. The officer waves his hand under his nose at the stench, embarrassed.

“Hmm, yeah, pretty obvious, huh? But have you confirmed it’s a woman?”

“No. But this abaya is for women,” Detective Khalifa Saeed says, pointing to her black garments.

The officer adds, “And she...,” gesturing with his hands that the victim is small and petite.

“Yes, the stature is small, which also means she could be a girl, not a woman. But no one has identified her yet? No one’s been reported missing, other than the American woman?”
The detectives exchange looks before answering, “No, no identity. We have to take her to the lab.”

“With this sand and wind...and all those people walking around our crime scene, the whole thing is already shot to shit. Tire tracks every-Goddamn-where!” Del Toro catches himself, “Excuse me. Please, forgive me. I know it’s Ramadan.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” replies Khalifa Saeed.

“Bad habit of mine – cursing. My wife’s always telling me. However, these tire tracks and footprints will never yield a cast anyway. You’d have to be a genius with Plaster-of-Paris to get readable tire tracks out of this terrain,” Del Toro stands back up and surveys the thirsty expanse, “…but there may be things buried somewhere out there, so, we need to collect all this trash.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed’s eyes widen, “All of it?”

“Mile radius...,” Del Toro snaps his finger, “…metric system, metric system, I forgot...a kilometer radius at least. Could find something important, something she dropped, something the UNSUB dropped.”

“Yes, a team will walk a grid.”

“Around the tent, you need a rake.”

“A rake?”

Del Toro simulates raking with an invisible garden tool, “You know a rake? For raking up and collecting leaves and stuff.” Still looking confused, Del Toro clarifies, “Around the tent specifically, we need to be checking for feces.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed looks completely baffled now, “Feces?”

Not sure if Khalifa Saeed knows the English word, Del Toro says, “Poop,” and makes a motion with his hand of something coming out of his backside.
Khalifa Saeed blushes, “Yes, sir, feces, I know, but…”

“The suspect may have had a dog, or better yet, he, himself, may have defecated, which would yield DNA. He might do this as a reaction to being nervous and frightened if he’s weak of stomach or weak of conviction, but more likely, he might defecate to humiliate her or to taunt us by soiling the crime scene…literally.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed looks visible repulsed. They all take another look at the area before going inside the tent. There is trash from abandoned camp sites everywhere, and Del Toro can see the immensity of the scene dawn on the Emirati detectives.

Inside the tent, Del Toro asks the slight Indian man, “Doctor?”. “Yes, sir. Dr. Patel.”

He almost introduces himself as an agent but stops just short, “Del Toro, nice to meet you, but let’s get your team to turn her over onto the plastic, so we can get a good look at her. See if there’s anything identifiable that we can work with immediately. You never know what could be under her – a driver’s license, a hank of hair, a badge, a piece of clothing with a logo, anything.”

Dr. Patel works alone with the body for several moments, and then looks up at the hovering detectives, “Most assuredly, this is foul play. I would rule it a homicide, almost certainly.”

Del Toro and the two investigators further inspect the tent, inside and out. The forensic team takes fiber samples. It’s surprisingly cooler inside the tent, but the stench is suffocating. The flies are so numerous, they create an overlay of a million vibrations mixed together so that it becomes a blanket of sound, a cacophony of wings, to match the grotesque blanket of flies, an undulating, black murmuration of insects dispersing and converging upon the body, brazenly, as the men circle the corpse for a closer inspection at different angles. Detective Khalifa Saeed tells Del Toro, “It’s not fly season. Too hot, but I guess for this, in the shade, they will come out.”
Padding softly with the medical booties over his dress shoes, Del Toro walks the inside of the tent from corner to corner. There is a large rug that covers the entire floor within, so the deceased person is not laying directly on the desert sand, but on the carpet. It appears old and saturated with weeks of dirt the wind blew through the tent flaps. Del Toro asks the doctor for his pen light and inspects the canvas walls for markings, looking for writing or blood splatter. There appears to be nothing.

“Has this been sprayed with luminol for fluid transfers?”

Detective Khalifa Saeed replies, “No, the forensic team will do it when we give them some space.”

“This tent seems old,” Del Toro says.

“Yes, some locals said that this tent was used by someone long ago and has been here for many weeks, maybe months. Some camper just left it out of laziness or intended to use it again. It is quite common around here – to abandon a tent.”

Del Toro stares down at the corpse’s final resting place and says, “She was posed. I’m pretty sure.” He scribbles notes in a pad. He notices that the body obviously is an adult female, by the figure and size. She’s petite alright but was robust in life, fleshy and buxom. She is stiff in a prayer position, bottom up in the air, weight forward on her forehead, which is resting between her feminine hands.

Khalifa Saeed concurs, “Yes, we think so, too. She was placed like this. We don’t think she’s local, not Arab.”

“Because you haven’t had an Arab victim yet? Is that what you’re going on?”

“Yes.”
Del Toro can’t help mumbling, “There’s a first time for everything, so you better be prepared.” He’s not sure the Emirati detective heard him, but he changes the subject. He sees that more of the forensic team are waiting nearby in Hazmat suits and says, “Goddamn, how can they be wearing those things in this heat?” Indeed, the perfect, early morning weather has quickly turned hostile.
Chapter 14

(Rugby and Equestrian Club, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi – United Arab Emirates)

An expanse of windows from the hardwood floors up to the five-meter ceilings makes up the entire wall overlooking the manicured grass of the rugby fields and the new cricket pitch. It won’t be quiet for very long in the clubhouse since members start hitting the gym as soon as the main gate slides open at 7:00 a.m. even on weekdays but especially on weekends, like today. So, the restaurant staff wipes down the dining room tables, not sure if they were properly disinfected the night before. The waitresses are hardly ever late, considering they live in a set of ramshackle dormitories behind the stables of the Equestrian Club, odors of horse manure and hay a constant bouquet, but today Anna is a no-show. She wasn’t on the golf cart with Prissy and all the other workers this morning, nor had she bothered to call in sick. She’s never called in sick.

The entrance to the restaurant is a pair of glass doors that the manager has locked behind them for some last-minute preparations and a quick meeting before the regulars start filing in. The ember in their eyes has long been burned out, their pale exteriors somewhere between zombie-esque and fed-up. Their work ethic shines through as half-hearted at best, cynical at worst. Their shifts are split on a rolling basis, so they feel like they are working all day. They work six days a week. They occasionally glance on the field below at the runners finishing their laps. A fitness boot camp is putting away their equipment, and mere steps away, the gym has already been open for an hour. The weekend warriors are vowing to never touch a beer again as they sweat the alcohol out of their pores from the night before at the bar. The weight room always smells of secondhand fermentation on a Saturday morning, so they keep the door to the outside open to air it out. The restaurant will quickly fill up with people they have seen every week for years-on-end, but that is the extent of their relationship with the customers. Serving these families. The manager
looks at the clock and says he’ll give Anna another minute before he must get started. He pins Prissy at her station with a sour look, like it’s her fault her Anna hasn’t shown up.

An American family whom they’ve all served before is sitting in the lobby, waiting for the doors to open so they can get an English breakfast and pancakes, their usual order. For the Americans and the other expatriates starting to rush in, the Rugby Club is the closest semblance of home they have here in a foreign country: The suds aren’t luxury-tax-laden like those sold at hotels, meals are familiar but without bacon, of course. The patrons from South Africa, Oceania, and the U.K. all speak the same language. Sappy pop and classic rock play on a constant rotation at a low volume from the surround sound. Tennis, footie, cricket, and rugby-sevens play on the T.V. screens next to the framed sports memorabilia, and only a handful of Arabs feel comfortable enough to mingle with the foreigners. Everybody recognizes the Arab regulars, but only a handful of people ever talk to them. Most of them are old Emirati police officers, off-duty and out of uniform. They skip the gym and start nursing their drinks at a lone table at the start of the day every chance they can. Keeping to themselves, they will sit there till the bar closes. The most strident barfly has just joined the American family on the couches in the lobby; still, no Anna. No phone call; no text message. No handwritten note on her unslept-in bed. The meeting has to begin.

Once the meeting has ended, another girl, Marie – on her day off – is called in as a replacement. She’s livid when she arrives, but the customers would never notice. She’s wearing the same defeated deadpan she wears every shift. She is on her second three-year contract, but she swears this might be the dirty trick that sends her home for good; she swears this time she might. After the Americans pay their bill, and slip Marie a tip, she quickly secrets it away in her pocket under her apron before it can be confiscated and put in the collective tip box, a wooden box with a slit to stuff money in. The American family knows that the tips in the collective box don’t go to
the employees; it goes to the house. So, they know how to pass her a tip like a drug deal, quick sleight of hand. Then, Marie heads straight for Prissy.

Their manager is Indian and nosey, so Marie speaks to Prissy in their mother tongue so he doesn’t understand. Not mincing any words, she says, “Where the hell is that goddamn slut!”

Prissy says, “You, too? You’re talking to me like I know where she is? What am I? Her mother?”

“Well, you live with her!”

“I don’t know where she is. She didn’t come home last night,” Prissy says, slightly concerned.

“Is all her stuff still there?” Marie asks.

“Yeah. She didn’t take anything.”

“What?” Marie’s demeanor softens, “Do you think she’s okay.”

“I have no idea, but I do know that she has been secretive these last couple of weeks.”

“Oh, really,” Marie doesn’t look so sympathetic anymore, “Secretive about what?”

“She told me she had a date last night, and she was all dressed up, but…” then she paused for dramatic effect, “she wouldn’t tell me who she was going out with. I thought it was Robert, but she said, nah.”

“Damnit, I knew it. I knew it. That slut! I know what’s going on!”

“Oh, you know, huh?” Prissy suddenly felt the need to defend her absent roommate, so she cocked her head and crossed her arms, “So, tell me Miss Mental Telepathy, what happened?”

In a hushed voice, Marie drops her eyes and starts to look busy, jangling flat wear around and folding napkins, she whispers, “Hold on, hold on, the manager’s coming.” Prissy unfolds her
arms and makes a pass through the dining room. Customers are trying to wave her down, but she’s good at pretending she doesn’t notice them.

“Tell me then, what’s your big theory?” Prissy asks, once the manager has moved to the kitchen.

“You mean to tell me you don’t know? You really don’t know?”

Prissy answers her with raised eyebrows and a terse shake of the head. Marie continues, “Haven’t you noticed how much weight she been gaining?”

“Oh, bullshit, she has not.”

“She has to!”

“Are you implying…she’s…” Prissy couldn’t even say it, so she motions a baby bump with her hands.

“Believe me, she must have run off.”

With a look of utter disbelief, Prissy asks, “You think she ran off with some guy who knocked her up? That’s your theory? Ha! That ridiculous!”

“No, no, no. She’s never going to hear from that guy ever again. She probably ran off back home before they can arrest her! She has to leave before she gets too big, and they won’t let her fly without clearance from a doctor.”

“She’d leave without any of her clothes or pictures or anything?” Prissy says with contempt.

“When you run off, that’s how you do it. That’s how I’d do it anyway.”

Prissy stands there dumbfounded, “I know where she keeps her passport. If it is still there, then we know she hasn’t run off.”

“If her passport is still there, then I will strangle her the next time I see her!”
Chapter 15

(Somewhere in the U.A.E.)

The shayla is next on the table – a length of cloth that matches the abaya – it takes you many trials to place it around your head correctly – it doesn’t come loose – you’re amazed how ugly and plain it makes you – even with all the make-up – makes all women who wear it ugly and plain – you look like an emaciated grandmother – you look perfect – you wouldn’t recognize yourself if you passed a mirror on the street – your disguise is so dear to you – almost as precious as the khanjar – almost – sits at the very end of the table – opposite the zip ties – it is a battoulah – a burqa made of thinly hammered brass – an ornamental face covering worn by traditional Bedouin women – they are going out of style – hardly worn by young women – everyone will assume you’re an old lady – that’s what you want – it frames the middle of your face – the bottom of your chin barely exposed at the bottom – goes across the top of your penciled-in Arabic eyebrows – it is meant to highlight the eyes – only the eyes – the burqa plate covers the nose and mouth – it is sharply folded in the middle – curves down toward the ears on the top part of the plate – meets at a triangular point on the bottom – above the chin – looks like a metallic moustache to Westerners – it’s very startling to see on a woman’s face – yours is special – hammered swirls and designs along the edge – yours is more than a century old – could have been a sheikah’s.
Chapter 16

(Desert Crime Scene outside Al Ain, U.A.E.)

The band of local police standing around the perimeter start to draw closer and crowd around the tent for a peek inside. Del Toro motions for them to step back and maintain a sense of boundary but gives up as the language barrier just adds to the chaos. As the forensic team extracts the body from the scene, her stiff rigor-mortis hands give way, revealing more of her face, and one of the detectives gasps and stifles a wretch.

Del Toro cannot understand when Detective Khalifa Saeed says to his partner in Arabic, “She looks local,” but he easily gets the drift by the loss of color in their faces.

As they maneuver her from the kneeling pose onto her side to put her a body bag, it looks like she’s cringing in a fetal position instead of locked in prayer. The forensic team places brown paper bags around her hands and feet and secures them with rubber bands.

Dr. Patel notes both into the voice recorder app on his phone and to Del Toro, “Her eyelids are almost completely closed, but I can tell by the hollow depression in the sockets that the eyes have probably been enucleated. Not from predation. Too clean around the sockets.”

“Enucleated?”

“Eye globes removed. Just like the others.”

“Holy shit, that’s a first for me.”

The doctor admits, “Me too.”

“Any other wounds?”

“Yes, major ones. But because the clothing is black, and the shadows in here, I will have to get her back to the lab to inspect them all.”

The Emirati detectives struggle to eavesdrop on Del Toro as he mumbles to himself, “Oh, Brenda, this one is already in mid-stride,” then he says out loud in a commanding voice, “Let’s
stand back and give the doctor some light.” To the Emirati detectives, he whispers, “We need to keep these locals from seeing her. They may know…”

Just then, one of the policemen from the nearby city of Al Ain bellows a wounded sound and rushes towards the tent. The others follow him and all hell breaks loose as officers and the forensic team struggle to keep the local mob from trampling straight into the tent.

A distraught police officer – gruff, hirsute, and swarthy – becomes inconsolable, growing manic. In Arabic, the man screams something Del Toro knows is significant, but he could not guess the direct translation was, “Let me through! That’s her! That’s my cousin! No! No! Her friends said she went to a tournament in Dubai!”

All the locals are empathetic, and they hold the distressed man tightly by the arms, but Del Toro remains wary, suspicious even. He approaches the thrashing officer, but the man is too riled up to console. Del Toro says, “We’ll need to talk to you...when you’ve had some time to calm down.” Everyone stares at Del Toro, awestruck by his complete lack of compassion. He turns to Detective Khalifa Saeed and asks, “Does this guy understand English?” and thumbs towards the wailing heap on the floor, “We’ll need to speak to him...to start our victimology.”

Already starting to head back to the vehicles to get out of the rising heat, Del Toro squints from the dust and glare in his eyes. Enraged, the hysterical officer breaks free and rushes to attack Del Toro, but he’s caught just short of reaching him. He manages to throw a handful of sand in Del Toro’s direction, but Del Toro just turns his cheek.

Del Tor couldn’t possibly understand the tirade, but, once again, gets the gist as the man rails at him in Arabic, “Foreigners brought all this! This is not an Arab man who does this! No Muslim could do this!
Momentarily surprised at such aggression aimed specifically at him, but otherwise oblivious, Del Toro walks towards the Nissan Patrol, and the mourning officer, still frothing, is brought to the ground by the other locals.

Del Toro pulls the medical examiner close, saying, “I’m sure you’ll preserve her as much as possible, doctor?”

“Of course, sir,” the doctor says, ingratiatingly.

Del Toro, faint from the heat and lack of sleep, is unable to quite process what he’s just experienced. He climbs in the 4x4 and notices Detective Khalifa Saeed and his partner seem to be talking heatedly about him in their mother tongue, “Are you sure about this guy? You might have to remind him he not a real agent anymore.”

Det. Khalifa Saeed responds, “I was thinking the same thing. And did you see him out there, I thought he was going to shrivel up and die in the heat. He must be from some snowy part of his U.S.”

They share a chuckle, and the partner says, “And you saw what he did to poor Mansour Abdullah? What an insensitive sisterfucker!” Del Toro definitely heard “U.S.” in there somewhere, so he know they’re making fun of him. Just then, their vehicle bottoms out on the crest of a sand dune, and they’re stuck fast in the sand. Del Toro prays to good God they don’t expect him to get out and help dig the Nissan Patrol out of this mess.
Chapter 17

(Somewhere in the U.A.E.)

Every time your phone dings with a notification, you wonder if it’s a trap and they’ve got you. They’ve found you out. You reach for your phone and see that it’s not your personal phone sounding off, which makes you even more nervous. It’s your burner phone you got in Germany. It’s low-grade, and you realize now you should have gotten one with a little more capability. This one can barely handle the bandwidth necessary for your VPN. With the VPN, you’re making at least some attempt to appear like you’re not in the country when you respond to people’s messages. You never use the phone to speak to anyone; only the messaging apps. The one you just received reads:

“Mr. Alan, I get your number from newspaper you used to write for. They told me to send message to you.” The English is broken, which you’ve learned to expect here.

You swear out loud, “Fuck!” You told them to stop giving your name and number out to every Tom, Dick, and Harry, or, in this case, every Bita, Ranita, and Mary! Another message dings immediately. Apparently the person see the two little blue checkmarks indicating you’ve checked your messages. It reads, “They told me I need to be secret because you fear trouble, but I need your help, please!”

You quickly text back, that you don’t know how you can be of any help anymore, that you don’t know anything, which is a lie. You know everything.

A message comes back, “This not true. I know you write story about the killer and you hiding.”

You write back that someone at your newspaper doesn’t know what they’re talking about, that they must be mistaken, that you could be getting into trouble right now, even as you text.
A message returns, “I know you are scared, but you don’t be scared of me. I don’t tell on you. I need help.” You try to ignore this message, try to go about your seclusion. You take a quick step outside and climb the ladder near the shed to look over your villa wall. There is no one on the streets for blocks and blocks. You feel some relief. The phone dings again, sending a copy of the same message as before, “I know you are scared, but you don’t be scared of me. I don’t tell on you. I need help.” You receive this message a third, then a fourth time.

You yell out loud, “Uggh, fine!” and you start texting for this unknow random person to send you a name, and their story. Then, you finally text that you will see what you can do…IF YOU CAN, WHEN YOU CAN!!!”

A message comes back immediately, “Thank you, my name is Prissy. I am friends with one girl who goes missing now. Please help for me.”
Del Toro and his two hosts are sweaty and gritty. They are all trying to stay under the shade of the truck while they dig out the axle. The two Emiratis become testy with each other and start arguing about the best way to free the vehicle. Del Toro decides to break up the tension, “Hey, guys, guys, guys, I know we didn’t spend much time out there on the scene, but there is nothing we could gain baking in the sun.”

The two Emiratis look guilty, like they know they’ve been caught talking shit about him. They fear for a second that he might have been fooling them all along and may understand Arabic. Del Toro looks Arab to them after all, same complexion, similar feature. Could pass for Egyptian.

They’ve dug enough, and now feel confident they can drive out of their predicament. They all hop in the truck, and Del Toro mutters, “Finally.” Once inside, he continues his conversation, “There are things I can already tell.”

“Really?” Detective Khalifa Saeed says with skepticism, dabbing his brow with his ghutra.

“For one, we are looking at a secondary crime scene here, probably even a tertiary crime scene,” Del Toro explains but realizes he should start using less clinical vocabulary, ”That means there are probably other crime scenes that came before this one. There was probably an initial – sorry, first – crime scene, where the woman was kidnapped or killed or both. Then, there is probably another separate crime scene where the UNSUB took her to spend time with her, that’s the secondary crime scene. Although we couldn’t see many wounds on the body, judging by how pale she is, she probably bled out completely somewhere else. Then she was cleaned, and redressed. So, we are looking at the most inconsequential crime scene because he probably took the most precautions to leave this one clean. This is just the dump site – the tertiary crime scene – the third crime scene.”
“And you said UNSUB, what does that stand for?”

“I’m sorry. I thought that was common knowledge. It means *unidentified suspect.*”

“We guessed as much,” Detective Khalifa Saeed smirks, “and we agree with your findings.”

“Of course, we can’t be sure, but we’ll get her back to the lab, and you guys can pray there’s some kind of trace evidence. Then, we need to hit that whole kilometer area with ground penetrating sonar for gravesites, but, by the looks of it, he’s not going to bury his bones anymore. He’s done with that.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed says curtly, “Yes, we know how to grid a crime scene. We studied in America and took many courses at Scotland Yard.”

Del Toro says into his collar, “Sure didn’t know how to secure a perimeter.”

Khalifa Saeed says, “Excuse me?”

“I said, ‘That’s spectacular.’”

“Is this a joke for you, Del Toro? For us, this is...*Shaitan,* a...demon! This is *haram!* It’s evil. I mean, we know he’s a man, but he is motivated by something evil we cannot understand.”

“Actually, we can. That is what I’m supposed to be here for. This is what you wanted me for. We take a set of patterns that other killers have already shown, and we base our analysis on repeated behavior – behaviors of others that came before our UNSUB and then compare them to his habits. But, you’re right, you’re right. I’m just...just trying to prove my worth, that’s all. I haven’t seen it all. I’m not immune to all this stuff, either. I almost threw up along with everyone else.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “We’ve never seen anything like this before, so we are not used to it. At least you have some experience.”
“On the outside, I may seem fine, but on the inside, I’m disgusted just like you. I see my wife’s face in every victim for a split-second before I shake it off and look through it.”

“This makes people angry, and they want to blame someone, not just the killer, but someone, anyone. Everyone! Right now, that man who ran at you; he wanted to hold you responsible. It’s easier to blame anyone but ourselves. We should have taken care of this girl…and all the others.”

“We’re all to blame for this guy. We, Westerners, probably put the ingredients in the pot, but you guys cooked up the victims and served them up on a platter. Your society, your whole, new, pretty, safe bubble baked them at just the right temperature. Welcome to capitalism, welcome to globalization. You’re part of the New World Order.”

“Us?” Detective Khalifa Saeed said with a little too much indignation.

“Yeah, you. You made this beautiful, modern world with all these fancy hotels and shopping malls, inviting Americans, Russians, Germans, all these Europeans, then you show them how to take advantage of all the other brown people you brought in from all over the world. But don’t you understand? It opens the door for all of the ills from our society, too. All of us, all the Europeans will wipe their…their…feet of this place and leave a dirty mess at your doorstep. They’ll walk away once they’ve had their fun.”

“No, we will never be like that! Never let our country look like your country with guns and drugs and crime everywhere. We won’t allow it. We will catch this guy. This ONE guy! Execute him, and we will never let it happen here again.”

“You’d be surprise...but, I hope you’re right. For now, though, this guy is laughing at us,” Del Toro pauses because he can see that they want him to finish his thought, explain his reasoning, “I told you he’s done burying his bones because he’s not going to hide anymore. He put that girl
out in the wide open for a reason, and…” Del Toro was getting worked up now. He had to control himself, “Let’s get back to the hotel. I need water...lots of it.”

Del Toro saw an unopened bottle of water in the front seat that he can hear rolling by Detective Khalifa Saeed’s feet, but it’s never offered to him. *Is it because of Ramadan, or is it just me?*

Del Toro speaks up, “Okay, I thought I should save all of this for the preliminary write-up, but I will make some assumptions for you.” Detective Khalifa Saeed turns around in his seat to better hear what Del Toro has to explain while his partner continues threading the dunes. Del Toro continues, “I know from the dossier you gave me that you have other bodies that were concealed; they were buried, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is all kinds of bad for us, all kinds of bad.”

“Please, explain.”

“First of all, that means there may be a whole bunch of bodies out there that we don’t even know about yet. The article says many people seem to be missing. You know Gary Ridgeway was killing one a month, sometimes more.”

“Yes, we’re working on that.”

“But, he didn’t bury this one, did he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Why not?” Del Toro asks leadingly.

“Could be many things,” Detective Khalifa Saeed counters, “You see that the area is used by a lot of locals to camp and drive their trucks, maybe he was bothered. They might have interrupted him.”
“Yes, maybe, but I don’t think so. I think he has stopped hiding.”

“Which means he is more confident?”

“Yes, yes, exactly!” Del Toro is exited that they are on the same page, “This guy is done hiding his crimes, now he wants to boast about them.”

“This is bad news.”

“Phew, I’d say!” Del Toro can’t help but react to the overstatement, “Yeah, that means that he’s bold and better at what he’s doing.”

“He doesn’t care at all anymore.”

“Yes, you’re right. He doesn’t care or worry about getting caught,” Del Toro leans forward, “This is the worst thing that could happen for us…and the best”

“Bad because he will start killing more people in less time?”

“Yes, bad because he could be in what we call his frenzy stage, but best for us because this is the stage where they make mistakes. But there is something just as bad.”

“Which is what?”

“It could mean he’s leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“Yes, I know that this country is made up of mostly expatriates who come here to work for a short time. He could be ready to leave and never come back. If he does that, we may never find him.”

“That is why we were reluctant to release anything in the news,” Detective Khalifa Saeed says, shaking his head.

Del Toro shoots him a finger-guy and a wink, “Yup, that newspaper article in the New York Tribune is going to bite us in the ass for sure.”
The discussion catches Del Toro off guard when Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “If he leaves our country, that would be best for us.”

Del Toro is at a loss for words, and Detective Khalifa Saeed fills the pregnant pause with a quip so jovial, it was as if he suffered from a short-term memory disorder. He says, “We’re going take my partner to his vehicle, and then I’ll take you somewhere nice before we drive back to Abu Dhabi.”
Chapter 19

(Recent past – Somewhere in the United Arab Emirates)

The flies – they watch him. They watch with a thousand eyes at a time, a black, collective consciousness as one humming swarm. He hates them more than anything alive, but they share one trait. Flies are fascinated and drawn to eyes as much as he is. He is completely covered from head to toe in his abaya right now, yet they still find his eyes. Flies go away somewhere at night because they cannot see what’s coming for them, so they hide. Where they go, he’ll never understand for he knows they cannot sleep, cannot close their countless, light-refracting lenses. It is dark now, but still some stragglers have found him. There are very few pests to deal with in the desert – hardly any insects to contend with. Sure, there are ants, scorpions, snakes, and mice, but they are not readily to be found, not invasive or infesting. In fact, mosquitoes would be far worse for him, but there are very few here since stagnant pools of water immediately dry up into the parched earth. He stands still in the dry, dusty alley, careful not to make a move, not a flinch.

There is one short season of flies here. During this small window of time, they are unbearable. In the summer, the sun is too intense for the common fly; the sunlight is too magnificent for their sundry, reflective eyes. He imagines their wings would crinkle up and turn to dust. Their moist eggs would stiffen before the first molting under this desert heat. Any black surface they land on would singe them as if put to a flame.

But this is the season of the flies when the weather has cooled down to a tolerable degree, and all the flies compensate for each and every maggot that couldn’t propagate the rest of the year. So, they rush and horde, pester and flourish like shameless, bacchanalian revelers to a feast. As much as he hates them, he promises a sacrifice unto them. He will give them something salty and sticky to lap up with their long proboscis, to taste with their labellum, something sanguine to siphon through their exterior pseudo-tracheas. But for now, he begs them to leave his face alone. He
must stand stone still, so they attack his eyes, lick his sweat. He must tolerate them landing and
crawling on him, one after another, incessantly, until it is safe to move again.

Earlier, he stationed his car in the empty mosque parking lot on a quiet street with very
little traffic flow. Neighborhood mosques don’t use surveillance cameras, so he doesn’t have to
worry about that. Nearby is a deep wadi that used to be much shallower until a day last year when
the clouds came and stayed for an entire week, drizzling a light spattering of droplets and mist,
which eventually added up to a torrent of runoff through the streets and every wadi. That water
ravaged through the concrete embankments like a furious, brown river, ripples of waves in the
current like mountainous tides, wanting but unable to crest. The next day, the muddy bottom of
the wadi was two meters lower. Whereas before the rains, the top of a person’s head could be seen
walking through the wadi from the street, now it was so deep that someone could easily traverse
the neighborhood through this wadi unseen from the sidewalks above. But he would only use the
wadi in case of an emergency.

Last week, he sat on the short wall that lines the wadi, and he shot out the streetlight that
illuminates the mosque parking lot with a ball-bearing flung from a powerful wrist-braced
slingshot. It only took three tries before the light went out with a small explosion of impact; the
ball-bearing pierced right through the lamp covering without shattering it completely.

Instead of the wadi, he uses the alleys between the villas. Every villa in these nicer
neighborhoods where the Emiratis and the professional expatriates live have high walls all the way
around their homes; the Spanish hacienda is modelled on the Arabic villa. Between the villas are
passageways where people seldom go because they don’t make pleasant walkways. They are not
paved or cobbled; they are left sand and rubble. Old building materials, broken bricks, house tiles,
blown trash, weeds, hewn branches from their courtyards, and the like find their way to the
alleyways and settle there forever. He has carefully selected this neighborhood for the caliber of its residents.

In the summer months, it is not abnormal to see people out walking around late at night or into the early morning hours as that is the only time temperatures become remotely bearable. In the winter season, people stroll around in the early evenings for the cool breeze and the waning day’s lingering humidity, but an old woman, like he’s dressed would be accepted in any neighborhood at any time of day. At night, witching hour, dusk, or dawn, an old Arabic lady is free to wander as she pleases. They are revered and respected; their comings and goings are not to be questioned. They could be working out the rheumatoid arthritis of their creaky knees, or they could be taking a long stroll to and from the mosque for the 4:00 a.m. call-to-prayer.

Now, he is an old woman, doddering along the sidewalk with his cane clicking into the pavement with each feigned step of impairment. The pace is Mollusca-slow, but that is what he wants. He must be able to peek into the open gates of the villas as he ambles by. Everyone keeps their gates wide open for cars to drive in and out, and anybody could walk into any villa’s bricked courtyard without a problem. Not a single gate is closed, much less locked. When he does come upon a locked one, his curiosity is piqued. Are they out of town? Why is this gate closed today when normally it isn’t?

He continues down the street. Every Emirati villa employs a driver. They are usually Indian or Pakistani men who run errands and tend to the gardens inside and outside of the villa walls. Their living quarters are usually right by the main gate; they are the flies on the walls once the sun goes down. They mill about and smoke cigarettes with the drivers from other villas, but they would pay no attention to the sight of a traditionally-dressed, old lady walking down the street. At most, they might wonder what house she came from, but once they aren’t able to place
her, they would return to smoking and joking with their friends in their air-conditioned, concrete hovels or just standing around under the trees, assuming she was just some old woman from a block or two over.

He keeps an eye on the drivers at all times, and he knows he will never be able to see them all. Sometimes the drivers have an old discarded sofa resting beneath the date palm trees, and they can hardly be seen sitting there under the shelter of fronds. Of course, Westerners don’t employ drivers at all, but they close their gates more often than the Emiratis, seeking more privacy for their disdained dogs, their pork-frying barbeques, and their clinking bottles of beer. All haram.

But the old lady needn’t worry about the drivers, needn’t hurry; she’s a little old grandma, nothing more. She continues through the affluent neighborhood, and once she reaches a dark corner of a house where the tall, front gate is closed and locked, she darts into the alley. With her black abaya, she would appear as just a movement out of the corner of someone’s eye before they would admit they were mistaken, had just been seeing things. Or, maybe a cat flitted by; yes, that’s it. They’re feral by the handful around here. Now, he’s just some crazy old lady in the alley, swallowed by darkness if anyone cares. With branches from trees inside of the villa walls on either side of the alley creating a canopy, it is almost like a tunnel. The streets at both ends of the long alleyway are brightly exposed by the streetlights, but in the middle of the alley, beneath the overhang of limbs, he is drenched in utter blackness. He stops for a second to straighten his burqa tightly on his face and effortlessly with a practiced hand, slides his cane into a sheath he sewed by hand into the back, left shoulder of his abaya as if his cane were a sword. The flowing length of material from his abaya and his padded undergarments are awkward and ungainly, but still he’s able to leap up and grab the top of the wall with one tan-gloved hand. Then he pulls himself up with the other. There he perches on the wall near the trees, letting his eyes adjust to the dim lights
positioned around the courtyard. He is confident that no one is outside, so he leaps down noiselessly, no more than the sound of a pomegranate or a garden mango, over ripe, hitting the ground.

He skulks around from window to window expecting no one to be home since the gate was unusually locked, but there are lights on in the house…and movement, the titter of little girls. Suddenly, the back door near the kitchen flings open and an Ethiopian nanny starts to walk towards the garbage bins behind him with a white plastic bag of refuse in her hand. He freezes stone still, and with the courtyard lights behind him, facing her advancement, he all but disappears from her point of view in the blinding light she’s walking towards. He feels the rush of blood inside him begin to heat up, and the radiant fervor within might soon glow hot and give him away. A fly, then two, senses his dead stillness, and immediately they begin buzzing around his face and landing near his eyes. *Goddamn the flies*, he burns, *I will give you something to feast on!*

He had hoped that this house would be empty, so he could wander around the homeowners’ lives while they are away. Perhaps find himself a perfect place inside the house to stage an ambush later. He’s disappointed. He didn’t want an Ethiopian nanny tonight, all skin and bones, hardly more than a girl. It amazes him how similar all Ethiopians look alike to him, how a Sudanese looks like a Sudanese and an Ethiopian looks like an Ethiopian; almost the same but he can easily tell them apart. He has cut his teeth on their ilk, but he’s after finer game now, a higher class, womanly and strong, plump and rich with privilege and pampering, soft and supple. This Ethiopian nanny would be too easy,

He lets her pass right by him as he crouches by a large potted plant; he is no more than a gradation of obscurity within the shadow. He gathers up the material of the *abaya* in his hand around his waist readying himself to make the jump back over the wall into the dusty alley. He
watches the lazy swish and sashay of the nanny’s sarong and hears the slap of her sandals as she approaches the garbage. When she turns around the light would be facing him, not behind him, so he must move. Deftly, he makes his escape, leaping up and over the wall in a single motion of flapping garments. As he touches down, he hears her gasp, and she claps her hands together, making a hissing cat sound, then a loud, “shoo” followed by a stomp of her feet. She says something in her language, probably, “Fucking cat!” As he approaches the end of the alley nearest the street in the direction of his car, he arrests himself, catches his breath. He drops the hem of his abaya, adjusts his metal face plate, unsheathes the cane from his back, and falls back into character as the little old women with an assisted gait before he exits out into the light of the street.

As he makes his way towards his car parked a few blocks away, he approaches cautiously, looks closely, and, as far as he can tell, there is no one around. The streets remain empty. In the last stretch before the safety of his vehicle, a car’s headlights turn the corner, speeding down the road. He looks directly into the windshield, unabashed, but cannot make out anything in the dark cab. However, the occupants of the car see her, bright and clear – a little old lady, crossing the road, harmless as a fly.
Chapter 20

(Abu Dhabi - Al Ain Road to Al Ain)

Ramon Del Toro tried to free himself from the inescapable pull of the gracious invitation to *Iftar*, not because he was unfriendly or antisocial, and not because he was opposed to learning about the culture and customs of his host country, but because it was a group of a religious stranger on the same day he had just witnessed a mutilated woman being zipped in a body bag. The two events didn’t gel well under normal circumstances, but certainly not when he’d be expected to be cordial and lighthearted. No matter how politely he tried to refuse, he found declining Detective Khalifa Saeed more uncomfortable than just agreeing to tag along.

Del Toro was told that it would make no sense to return to Abu Dhabi without making a quick appearance at his cousin’s *Iftar* dinner where they could get refreshments and a bite to eat after sundown. He’d have to admit it was a pleasure to be chauffeured around instead of always having to drive like back home, and he enjoyed that he could pay attention to the new scenery around him – as dull and monotonous as the desert can be. So, he tried to get into the spirit of going to party.

It wasn’t long before they were out of the wasteland and flying down a multi-laned highway. Planted alongside of the road were green trees separating the smooth from the vast expanse of orange sand. Del Toro was astonished at this feat of landscaping, irrigation tubes drip-feeding every shrub for as far ahead as the eye could see.

Not far from the arid wilds of the crime scene, they came into the outskirts of Al Ain, a small city he could tell by the lazy traffic and uncluttered exit ramps. Mansions crowded the highway just out of reach, and Del Toro whistled at the scope of their marble and sandstone construction, remarking at how big they were compared to typical American homes. But Detective Khalifa Saeed informed him that the giant houses accommodated entire families. It wasn’t unusual
for villas, as Khalifa Saeed referred to them, to have 10 or 12 people in them, from four, five, six
kids to grandparents living under the same roof, including multiple nannies – sometimes one per
child. And if an Emirati took another wife, her house might be within the walls of the same
compound, or just down the block, but it had to be equal in size and amenities as the man’s other
wife…or wives.

Zig-zagging through a residential neighborhood, Detective Khalifa Saeed pointed out that
the missing American woman he read about in the dossier rented a villa in a neighborhood not
unlike this one or any other neighborhood throughout the U.A.E. As they got closer to their
destination, Del Toro tried to reconcile how he was going to handle people questioning the purpose
of his visit. He was going to feel like both the gaping fish out of water and the oafish elephant in
the room. Absent would be his wife, Amanda, and his newborn, who usually drew the bulk of
attention at a gathering with their matching translucent skin, she was colloquially beautiful, a
cornhusk queen from the sticks, and his son, Cole, well, was a baby. What more need a baby be
to dazzle a room and steal the attention away from him.

What was he was supposed say when people innocently asked who he was or what he was
doing there? That he was there as an unqualified stand-in to solve the desecration of their country’s
utopia? That he was actually a wordsmith there to end the ravaging of their women? And what if
he played-up his former law enforcement ties? It was never a good idea to indicate too plainly that
you’re an officer of the law. They taught him that in the academy. People might intend him harm
just because he was an F.B.I. agent, or just because he’s American. Now, he stepping into a literal
den of Muslims – the stereotype of terroristic clandestine figures out to inflict havoc on infidels
like him. He knew he was being paranoid at best, racist at worst. Even though the U.A.E. was
supposed to be America’s strident ally, wasn’t one of the 9/11 terrorist that hijacked the United
Airlines flight 175 an Emirati? He seemed safe, felt as if he were in good hands, but should he keep his guard up? What was expected of him? To adhere to his training or trust the handlers of his assignment? The academy taught him to keep his personal details low-key, to a minimum, barebones information, told him to watch his own back, to not have telephone conversations in public, not to drive home the same way from work too consistently. But he had left all of that behind. He was an internationally published author now. The whole world could Google his life story in five seconds. He would just have to go with the flow, adapt and overcome.

When they got into the residential neighborhoods, Del Toro noted the lack of traffic on the streets, and when he asked why there were so many yellowed-striped speedbumps, he was told, “Emirati boys love their vehicles,” which explained it all. Some of the villas were manicured outside the rotund walls surrounding each house and courtyard, but many were barren and unadorned in anything except scruff and weeds, sand and pebbles. Nevertheless, the foliage that decorated the inside of the villa walls traipsed over the fortress exteriors as palm trees, purple flowered vines, and jumbo mango leaves. Del Toro noticed how insulating the villa concept was. Not much would be noticed taking place on the other side of the walls by the occupants of the house or even by the drivers and gardeners who, Khalifa Saeed pointed out, lived in little concrete cubicles near the front of each gate. The detective revealed his slightly camouflaged contempt for the unskilled help, saying they were indolent and inattentive if they weren’t busied with a duty. Each household had a hired-hand or two, responsible for shuffling kids to school or the ladies of the house to the mall. They watered the garden, fixed things around the villa, and washed the cars, which was one of their most common tasks, something they might be expected to do for their sponsors every few days. As Khalifa Saeed mentioned this, they passed rivulets of hose-water snaking out of a villa gate and collecting as a useless pool in the street. Detective Khalifa Saeed
didn’t seem to notice how wasteful this might seem to someone from the desert, like himself, where water is precious and its consumption is regulated. But as his sentiments wandered in the judgmental, he remembered how his grandmother had basically been a kept woman, waited on hand-and-foot by their illegal alien housekeeper from Mexico. So, he had no room to talk.
Chapter 21

(Recent Past – Saarah Khalil Abdullah Ahmed Al Meqbali’s last tournament)

I’m getting ready to leave, and my mother’s like, “You can’t go until you take your
brothers to get an ice cream,” and I’m like, “They’re too fat as it is.” Then she tells me to stop
speaking to her in English, and I tell her in Arabic, “You know the English word for ‘fat,’ don’t
you,” and I puff up my cheeks and waddle towards her like a gigantic obese monster. And she’s
like, “I’ll give you a kheff.” and raises her hand to me, but, yeah sure, like I believe her. She’s
never slapped me before…well…not since I was like five or six when I embarrassed her at the
Carrefour supermarket.

So, after I take the little brats to 31 Flavors, I put on my volleyball uniform and throw my
abaya over it, so I don’t have to change when I get there. I say, “Bye, Marshmallow Lama!” and
my mother hates that and goes, “Stop with the English,” and I go, “Fine, masalama! as she’s
yelling something from the majlis, but I can’t understand a word she saying, and, of course, the
second I get in my car – well, it’s my dad’s old car, but it’s practically mine – my mother is already
blowing up my phone, screaming, “YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING WITH SHAMA!!!” and I’m
like, “Duh, mom, what do you think? She going to walk to our house? It’s like 40 degrees
outside!” And she says, “I told you not to talk to me in English; I’m going to take you out of that
school,” and I’m like, “Sorry, mom, but if you don’t want me speaking English, why did you send
me to the American school!” Then, she’s like, “I shouldn’t have sent you to that school!” and I’m
like, “I know, you should have sent me to the British school,” and that really pisses her off because
she hates any accent other than American. She can’t understand a word the British say, and she
barely knows any English anyway. Irish or Scottish accents, forget about it!

So, when I get to Shama’s house, her nanny, Marjani, lets me in and I ask her to braid my hair
really quick, and then Shama comes downstairs still in her pajamas, looking like zeg, with grey
lips and no make-up or anything, and my mouth falls open, and I say, “Shut the front door, you’re not even ready yet?” and she just looks at me until I give her a look that says, “Okay, bitch, what’s up?”

She still doesn’t want to tell me, so I pull away from Marjani – my hair halfway done – and I drag Shama into her dad’s majlis, and she says to me, all mopey eyed and whiney, “I’m feeling sick” all boo-hoo, wah-wah, I’m a big baby. And I say, “Don’t tell me you’re not coming, you skinny bitch!” and she’s like, “Is this skinny?” and she points to her big badonkadonk and twerks on my leg, and I’m like, “See, you slut, you’re not too sick! You can make it.” And just then her dad walks in and we shoot up straight as a board, and she says, “Sorry, dad, I needed a pen,” all meek and mousey like a good little girl. And he said, “Don’t ask me again. You’re still not going; you’re too sick.” And that was it, the bitch stood me up.

As soon as her dad leaves, I grab her by her long, greasy hair – lovingly, of course – and say, “You need to pretend like you still went with me…if my mother ever asks,” and she acts all shocked and is like, “Why?” and I’m like, “WHY? WHY! Because, if I tell my mom that you’re not going with me, you think she’s going to let me go?” Then, Shama starts boo-hooing again, “Oh, your mom’s going to know I’m lying. What if she asks me for details? I’m not good at lying,” wah-wah, I’m a big, fucking baby! So, I say, “Just do it. You owe me for this shit,” and then I throw her own greasy hair in her face, and say, “Wash that shit, you dirty rag!” and she’s like “Wash this,” and twerks on my leg, again. And in my best Irish accent, I’m like, “Furr fox sick, at least tell Marjani to finish braiding my hair!” so she yells upstairs for Marjani to finish my hair. But Marjani is already standing right there shaking her head and tsk-ing us with a finger because she caught us twerking.
Then, I leave for the long ass drive to Dubai all by myself, which I’ve never done before, and I’m all nervous. My dad’s cruise control doesn’t even work, so I stay way below the speed limit so I don’t get flashed by the cameras, but it’s Thursday, so everyone is rushing to Dubai to party or whatever and there are ten million cars on the road passing me by like I’m standing still. I think I should play that podcast my professor wants me to listen to, about ancient elephants that used to live in Abu Dhabi two-hundred thousand years ago or something like that and they had four tusks instead of two, but I don’t want to hear about some fossilized elephant footprints they found in the desert, so I put on *Mohammed Ramadan* and some *Amir Diab*, instead.

It takes me two hours to get to the university parking lot where the tournament’s being held because the stupid GPS lady kept fucking me up, so I miss like ten exits. When I finally get there I’m super late. I’m glad I had my uniform on under my *abaya*, so I start to grab all my things because my purse spilled out on the floor of the passenger seat when I had to slam on the brakes and all my shit went flying. But it’s so dark in this parking garage, and I can’t see anything, and all of a sudden I scream because someone’s tapping on my window with a cane, and it scares the *zeg* out of me, but when I look up, it’s just some little old lady hunched over, wearing a *burqa*, so I give her the *shway-shway* signal with the tips of my fingers for her to wait while I grab my stuff and turn off the car. But the old lady starts walking away, so I have to rush to catch her because she starts turning down a dark alley, looking lost as hell, and I say, “Wait a minute, auntie, I’ll help you,” but in Arabic, of course, so I’m, like, jogging to her, trying not to drop anything. And when I get close to her, she swings around so fast in my face, she hits me with the cane. I don’t even realize that she’s bumped into me so hard until I’m already on floor, looking at the tires of my car way over there. I think, “How could she have been so stupid and clumsy to accidentally hit me that hard?” and she helps me up to my feet. She’s walking me towards my car, with her arm
around my waist, and I almost fall over. My jaw is really starting to hurt, and it doesn’t feel right. I’m really angry now and mumble through my broken face, “You should be more careful!” but I hear crunching when I try to yell at her, “You swung around so fast, you hit me with your cane!”

She’s directing me to the backseat door, shuffling me along, and when we get to my car, I notice in the reflection of the car window that the little old woman has grown so tall standing behind me like a black shadow, blocking out the distance dim light from the low, parking-garage ceiling. I can’t understand how she has grown like that, so broad and square-shouldered now, but before I can swing around and take a good look at her to comprehend what’s happening, she seems to twist all around me like a snake. I can feel the squeeze around my neck, and when I try to struggle, I feel her coil around me tighter with her legs pulling up high around my arms that are by my side. Her abaya falls all around me like a closing curtain and mixes with my own abaya. I can’t stand anymore holding her weight on top of me when she leans back, and we fall into the backseat. As the light starts to dim and stars sparkle before my eyes, I know I’ve been tricked.

I’m going to pass out, any second, and it’s amazing how slow and fast thoughts can go. Just seconds ago, my mind to was too weak and confused to figure out I was being attacked, and now my mind is quick enough for me to feel stupid, for me to feel terrible that I teased my mother and called my little brothers fat slobs when their ice creams dripped down their faces. I have to time to hope they will forgive me and to think, “I’m going to die.”

The constriction untightens for one quick instant, and I’m able to suck in a breath and plead, “Help!” and he uses his loose hand to close the car door. I try to suck in another breath, but there’s no room for my lungs to expand and breathe in, only to squeeze the air out and drown in the black folds of abaya fabric. Just before I fade away, I know the little old lady wasn’t a little old lady at all, but a monster, a monster, a monster...
Chapter 22

(Courtyard reception, Emirati Wedding - Al Ain, U.A.E.)

The armada of white SUVs haphazardly parked in front of a villa at the end of the street made it clear that they had reached their destination, apparently common sense and parking laws be damned. Rising above the top of the villa wall was an immense white tent, and Del Toro wilted at the thought of being inside of another stifling, canvas shelter. After rolling up on the sidewalk to find a parking spot among the other vehicles, he realized that this tent was unlike the tattered one at the crime scene. It was tall, spacious, and air-conditioned. A giant fan near the A-frame pitch sucked air out in a constant stream as cooling devices drafted cold air around the hungry guests awaiting sundown.

Del Toro looked around and was surprised to see absolutely no women among the throngs of men who milled about, smiling and conversing in brusque, boisterous Arabic. Only a few people, besides himself, were dressed as Westerners, the catering staff in their bellhop suits included. The others were boys in skinny jeans and baseball caps, an exaggerated hip-hop style that somehow missed the mark. Detective Khalifa Saeed motioned toward his cousin, who was hosting this charity *Iftar* for the neighborhood.

The tent seemed more colossal on the inside than it did on the outside. He found the other guests were sitting on the clean, plush carpets and up against pillows that looked like couches that had been truncated to the floor. Taking a cue form the other guests, Del Toro gathered that they were supposed to take off their shoes and leave them arranged at the mouth of the tent as willy-nilly as the trucks parked outside. Detective Khalifa Saeed rushed over to greet several people with the same enthusiasm Del Toro had noticed earlier – over-the-top with zeal and platitudes. He followed sheepishly behind the detective, and like a freshman at his big brother’s house party, he wasn’t sure if was glad not to be introduced or embarrassed. Each clutch of men gave the same
welcoming ritual, either darting glances at the stranger in their midst or hugging him like a long
lost relative.

As he feared, young men started swarming around him to practice their limping, high
school English. Del Toro thought, Oh boy, here we go again with the “Ah-mer-EE-kah” questions. But once a recent graduate who studied abroad asked him what part of the States he was from in impeccable English, the others were more than willing to live vicariously through their brethren’s linguistic prowess without having to embarrass themselves. This young man, almost a boy it seemed, was one of the few sprinkled throughout the crowd in a military uniform rather than a kandura. He explained he had been allowed to skip military service due to his stellar marks in high school, but now that he had graduated and returned from abroad, he immediately had to enlist. The young cadet had just finished nine grueling weeks of boot camp and was now on furlough until he’d received an assignment. Del Toro asked him if he feared being sent into one of ongoing conflict zones the U.A.E. seemed to be having in Yemen and across the gulf with Iran, but the young soldier said he had nothing to fear because his college education would bring him in as an officer. Del Toro said, “Who do you think tell the grunts what to do on the front line?” and the soldier’s brilliant white teeth disappeared behind his closed mouth. “Ah, man, come on, man, I’m just kidding, buddy, you’re going to be fine,” and the youngster’s dazzling smile lit back to life. 

As if Del Toro’s reassurance predetermined his safety on the battlefield, he was the young soldier’s new best friend, and he let everyone know it.

Somehow, night engulfed them unaware, and the evening call-to-prayer reverberated through the streets, signaling they could soon feast. The fasting crowd began to rise to their feet and make their way toward the flaps of the tent. Even with the call-to-prayer, Del Toro didn’t figure out right away that they were making a short pilgrimage to the neighborhood mosque. Since
there were so many men waiting for Iftar, some went to the mosque beckoning from around the corner, and some went to the one echoing from down the street.

Detective Khalifa Saeed had abandoned him again to join the others at the mosques, and Del Toro wondered if he should follow him. From out of nowhere, two smiling, teenage boys approached him and said, “You Muslim?”

Taken aback by the question, he was tongue-tied, “Ahhh, no. I’m not.” He looked around for Detective Khalifa Saeed for help, but he had already disappeared to wash up for prayer.

The other boy said, “What is your…,” the boy snapped his finger trying to remember the word, “Your…your…?”

Del Toro knew the word they were looking for, but he didn’t want to say it. Eventually, he conceded and said, “What is my religion?”

The boys broke into a unified laugh, “Yes, yes, your religion!”

Del Toro remembered the documents he read when applying for job in the U.A.E. which made the point that in order for a working visa to be approved, he had to select a religion. Atheism is not an acceptable concept in the Islamic school of thought, so Del Toro reached back to his childhood weekends of Catholic mass every Sunday. He lied again, “I’m Catholic,” but the boys looked at him in confusion. He clarified by touching his forehead, navel, shoulder, shoulder, with his right hand and ending it with kiss on his fingers, and said, “You know, Jesus.”

The boy’s eyes widened in epiphany and said, “Oh, oh, yes, Essa, Essa.” One boy said, “Essa is good. Good in Islam. He is like brother in Islam.”

The other boy said, “Why not Muslim?”

Del Toro didn’t know what to say, at last deciding on, “We all have…different beliefs. You know, beliefs?”
“If you speak, *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah,*” the boy snapped his fingers again, “you be Muslim.”

Del Toro said, “Just like that, huh, I can become Muslim?”

“Come and pray,” and the other boy said, “With us.”

Del Toro smiled at the oversimplification of this, “Only this, and I become Muslim.”

In all seriousness the boys said, “Bess. Only this.”

Just in time, Officer Mansour Abdullah came up to the boys, gave them a warm greeting, and shooed them off in a fatherly way.

Mansour Abdullah said, “I’m sorry about…”

“Oh, those kids, don’t worry about it.”

No sooner had the men returned to their seats on the carpet, all eyes turned to a billowing tent-flaps as Bangladeshi caterers filed in, hefting gigantic, domed platters of steaming food. The Emirati men seemed to know just where each platter would land as tray after tray of food was strategically placed among the dividing mob. Detective Khalifa Saeed suddenly reappeared, sat on the floor next to Del Toro, and pulled him gently to the carpet next to him, where the lid of the serving platter released a roiling cloud of steaming food once it was lifted. Although quite unfamiliar with the meat, Del Toro could tell that it was mutton from its distinct smell. Detective Khalifa Saeed said, “You like sheep? Little goat.” Del Toro thought to himself, *Well, is it goat, or is it lamb? What’s the difference besides one being creepy with horns and other being cute and fluffy.*

“Sure,” Del Toro half-lied. He had only eaten lamb a handful of times at an Indian restaurant on a date when he was in college. “We don’t eat a lot of goat in America, but this smells fantastic.” He lied again. On a heap of yellow, *biryani* rice, was an entire well-cooked animal,
flanked on the edges of the tray by flatbread and peeled, hard-boiled eggs. Del Toro decided that if he didn’t like the goat, he could fill himself up on rice and eggs. Miniature Cokes and Sprites, and half-sized water bottles were delivered to each pocket of men, and the party fell into silence as they plucked the tender meat off the bones with their bare hands.

Detective Khalifa Saeed noticed Del Toro’s ill-ease. He nodded toward an ablution station just outside the tent where men where the latecomers were still washing their hands and faces before for prayer before taking their places around the food. Glad he hadn’t been stupid enough to plunge his dirty hands into the communal meat, Del Toro clambered back up to his feet, slipped on his dress shoes at the tent entrance, and walked out to the fountain to clean his hands. He chased around a bar of soap that slid around the fountain floor between the men until he caught it. Mimicking the others, he washed his hands, then his face. When he rinsed and opened his eyes again, there before him was the man who had been wailing at the sight of the young, bloodless victim they scooped had into a plastic body-bag earlier that day. The man gave Del Toro a disconcerting grin, to which he stammered, “Ah-salam-alaikum.”

The man smiled and clapped Del Toro’s back like it was the hindquarters of a stubborn camel and dragged him towards the tent to eat.

“Wah-laikum salam. I’m Officer Mansour Abdullah.”

“Yes, the guys told me your name.” Officer Mansour Abdullah took a seat on the floor next to Detective Khalifa Saeed and Del Toro was forced to sit between them. Mansour Abdullah said something like, “Bel-ablee-ah,” which Del Toro took to mean, “Bon appetite.” Watching what the others did, he pulled his first piece of tender flesh from their communal supper with his bare hands and joined it with a scoop of rice. He discovered that all that myth about only eating with the right hand and not exposing the bottom of your feet to anyone was bullshit; people were
eating with both left and right, and their feet were pointing in all directions. He stuffed handfuls into his face, and realized how famished he was. He gorged himself, and washed it down with three tiny soft drinks. The entire tent of men ate in relative quietness. Men, who only moments ago, had stood next to each other, baying at the top of their lungs, now concentrated on filling their guts.

“No, no, not them. I’m sorry about today.” Del Toro noticed that Mansour Abdullah’s accent was strong, but he seemed in superb command of the language thus far, making him unsure of his actual ability.

Del Toro said, “No, no, I am sorry I wasn’t more sympathetic to your pain. I was running on pure business mode. I, in no way, meant to make you feel uncomfortable.” Still, unease ran through him, like an unexpected twitch of the eye. He continued speaking, “Things are never easy in these situations, and you may not like the way I have to handle things in this investigation, but I have to be frank.”

All the good-tidings that had flooded Mansour Abdullah’s face a moment ago slowly ebbed away, and Del Toro couldn’t determine if it was from a lack of understanding or from distain. Mansour Abdullah acquiesced, “Me and my family will do everything you need.”

“Well, I appreciate that because I believe Detective Khalifa Saeed has set up a meeting with you and some of your relatives tomorrow.” Detective Khalifa Saeed suddenly walked towards the tent doors and called, “Del Toro, please come and meet the host before we have to go. Ma-salamah, Mansour Abdullah! Ah-salam-alaikum,” to which Mansour Abdullah made no reply other than a wave. Del Toro was sure that if Mansour Abdullah found out he wrote books for living instead of actually catching criminals, he would kill him on the spot.
Del Toro used this opportunity to make his clumsy escape. It was evident that Detective Khalifa Saeed was taking advantage of the new arrivals to sneak away without having to bid a thousand goodbyes.

With daylight almost completely gone, Del Toro noticed a significant attribute to the arrangement of the villas in this neighborhood, asking Khalifa Saeed, “Are all the neighborhoods pretty much like this one?”

“Well there are poorer neighborhoods where workers from other nationalities live who don’t make as much money. Their homes would be more…more…”

“Small?”

“No. More…more…”

“Simple?” Del Toro noticed Detective Khalifa Saeed’s English has slipped a little and he was pretty sure he sniffed hints of expensive whiskey on the detective’s breath.

“Yes, like simple, but not having the trees and the grass, and not so nice.”

“So, a little more rundown?” Del Toro wondered why Khalifa Saeed hadn’t offered him a nip or two.

“Yes, yes, that’s it, rundown, And they would have more people.”

“Crowded?”

“Yes, crowded.”

“But in affluent neighborhoods, like this one, all the houses would be arranged similarly, side-by-side with just a small space between them like that.” Del Toro pointed out the passenger window at the dim alleys running between the walls of each neighboring villa as they drove through the neighborhood.
“Most neighborhoods would be like this, but those in Abu Dhabi or Dubai would be more city-like, maybe closer together.”

“I see, more urban, tighter alleys,” Del Toro continued to take in his surroundings and pointed to a low-wall that momentarily ran along the road they were driving on, “And what’s that over there?”

“Ah, we call that a wadi. It is like a system to take away the rain…when it does rain here, which is not too often.”

“So, most of the time it’s just dry concrete, like a ditch…for drainage? We’d call that a ditch. A drainage ditch, actually.”

“Yes, but it is not concrete. Too wide for concrete. It’s just sand at the bottom. It’s like a sand path for the water to follow when it rains. When it does, it can become very dangerous. People get killed when it rains hard because the water comes suddenly like a river. A brown river.”

“Hmm, we have those, too. Called ‘flash floods.’ Just as dangerous.” For the rest of the ride back to Abu Dhabi, Del Toro tried to peer into the scrabble of the alleys. Many villas illuminated the tops of their courtyard walls with lights, which made the alleys somewhat visible, but still black and menacing as alleys tend to be. While with other alleys they passed, the lightbulbs were old and broken. Some went completely without lights at all, creating ominous black mouths of a labyrinth that snaked through each block.
Chapter 23

(Phone conversation - Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

“Amanda, you would never believe how different we are from them!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, everything, everything, about us is so…so different from how they are. Not, not, in a bad way, but I can see why they hate us, and we hate them.”

“I don’t hate them.”

“I don’t mean you and me hating them. I mean our de-facto, Judeo-Christian base in America who thinks that all Arabs are fanatical terrorists who hate them.”

“Well, tell me, tell me what happened?”

“Fine, it’s hard to explain, but at first it was all business, and they put me up at the hotel and all that. Then eventually, after we visited a crime scene today, they fell back into their usual mode of things, and it was just, so…so different, so weird to witness.”

“Oh my God, I just can’t believe they’re giving you this opportunity to be an investigator again. It’s crazy! This will be fantastic for a new book.”

“I know, I know, but let me just tell you about how different it is here.

“Okay, yeah, what do you mean it’s so different?”

“I’m getting there, I’m getting there. It’s hard to put a finger on it. There are so many goddamn things to put a finger on, I feel like the Dutch boy plugging the damn.”

“Start with one thing, tell me one thing that comes to mind.”

“I’ll give you the whole day…”

“Yeah, skip all the crime stuff. You know I can’t stand that stuff. You can tell me about that later”
“So, after we’re done with the crime scene, we’re all hot and sweaty and heated from the weather and arguing about their procedures then they take me back to headquarters and apparently there are a lot of big wigs waiting for us when we get there. There is this really strange…ah…I don’t know how to put it…*obsequiousness*? Yeah, obsequiousness about the inner office dynamics like you’ve never seen before.”

“*Obsequiousness*?”

“Like ass-kissing – to the *Nth* degree ass-kissing.”

“Well, who’s kissing whose ass?”

“That’s the thing, everybody’s kissing everybody’s ass! *Everybody*’s shaking hands like twenty times. They work together, *shit*, half of them are related to each other, but it’s like they’re seeing each other for the first time in twenty years, handshaking and kissing each other on the cheeks, and falling all over each other offering a seat or offering a coffee or figs or dates or whatever they are, and telling people not to stand up on their account, all that stuff. It was crazy!”

“You’re kidding me! Like the Japanese with the bowing?”

“No, no, way worse than that, I’m talking genuine, to-the-hilt brown-nosing. So, I ask this guy who has been chaperoning me around – Detective Khalifa Saeed = what this is all about, and he tells me that that’s the way it always is. Apparently, it’s a custom for all Arabs, but even more so for the Emiratis, to have this over-the-top greeting every time your boss shows up or your elder or even just a regular visitor like me.”

“So, people were kissing your ass, too?”

“Kind of, but the thing is, it’s hard to tell how genuine they’re being, you know?”

“They’re that affectionate?”

“Well, they’ve got this thing called the *hajahmeh*. ”
“What the hell is a *hajahmeh*?”

“First of all, *hajahmeh* translates to ‘nose’ or ‘give me your nose’ or something like that. Have you ever seen an Eskimo kiss?”

“Oh my God, you mean when they rub their noses together?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s almost like that, but they just lean into each other and barely touch the tips of their noses together.”

“Men and women do this to each other.”

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME? There’s not a woman in sight for all this. I haven’t seen any women involved at all!”

“And you saw them do that? They’re still doing that now? In this day and age?”

“I only saw a couple of guys do it to the…shit…I don’t even know who he was, but he wasn’t a police officer and everyone was kissing his ass. So maybe he’s one of the *sheikhs* or he’s the *sheikh*’s relative or something.”

“And what about you? Are you supposed to do it, too?’

“I know! I worried about that! As it is, it’s already too much glad-handing and backslapping for my taste; it makes me feel uncomfortable. You know how when you’re at the office, and you see someone that you’ve already greeted in the morning, and you don’t know later in the day if you’re supposed to say hi again or whatever, and you feel kind of awkward, wondering *Ahhh, do I shake this guy’s hand again or just say hi or do I just do nothing at all?’”

“Yeah, that’s why I used to just stay in my office as much as possible.”

“Well that’s how it is here all the time! I feel like there’s a greeting every time you run into someone, especially for me because I’m this new foreigner, and they don’t know how to act with me. They’re all big smiles, and ‘Oh, *Ah-mer-EE-kah*? *Ah-mer-EE-kah?’”
“No, that’s not how they say it!”

“Yes, it is, I’m serious, and I’m like ‘Yes, yes, I’m American.’ Then, they’re so Eddie Haskel about meeting me, telling me I’m so handsome and how I’m a flower, I’m the moon and all this, and not just one guy, but, like, all of them are just so ingratiating with the compliments and stuff.”

“All this was at the office?”

“No, no, that’s the thing, they forced me, I mean forced me, to go out with them after work to a kind of celebration.”

“Like a party?”

“Kinda, but not really…”

“It’s the middle of the week! Who has a party in the middle of the week?”

“I know, right? Well, they have a pretty big celebration all month, going to a friend’s house to break their fast or restaurants, or whatever. Detective Khalifa Saeed said that wedding receptions here last for, like, three or four days. Everybody goes over to this guy’s parents big house, and they have a big, white tent set up outside, and you go in and all the men are there eating and having coffee…for days! No alcohol! No women!”

“No women?”

“No women, but, actually, there might have been alcohol, which was weird, but no, no women at all. And this guy wouldn’t take no for an answer. I tried and tried to get out of going, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. The women – they go to a completely different area of the house or different house for Iftar or something, but they don’t mingle together at all. I didn’t see a single woman.”

“You kidding me. They don’t even mingle on special occasions.”
“No way, not at all. I’m telling you, it’s nuts for us Americans to witness and not even close to a Mexican celebration, where people are getting knocked up spare room and fights are breaking out at quinceañeras. It’s just so, so…different. No beers, no dancing! No wait…actually he told me there is dancing at weddings! The men all get in a line and do this like head bopping dance with a skinny cane and someone playing these drums, like giant bongos. And the cane looks like something to smack a sheep’s ass with or something. He showed me how they do it.”

“Really?”

“I’m as serious as the day is long!”

“How long did you guys stay at this Iftar thing?”

“Oh, not long. We were in and out, but not before I had shaken ten million hands, and had ten million smiling faces ask me if I was American, and one guy finally says, ‘No, no. Not American’ and I told him, ‘Yeah, I’m American. I was born in America’ and he says, ‘No, your face looks like Mexico or same same like Mexico’ and I said, ‘Yeah, I am Mexican-American’ so I can tell that their version of an American is a big bo-hunk with blond hair and blue eyes.”

“Ah baby, you’re my bo-hunk. My melanin-infused ho-hunk”

“Yeah, I’m going to infuse you with something when I see you next, but I have to go, baby, someone’s at the door.”

“When do I get to come over there?”

“You know what? I don’t know. It might be possible. I have to go, baby. I have things to do.”

“We love you.”

“Love you, dear, I really have to go. It’s late and the coroner is sending over his initial findings.”
Chapter 24

Del Toro receives the full autopsy report, which can be found on Appendix 2.
Chapter 25

(“Interrogation Room” - Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Somehow, I convinced Detective Khalifa Saeed to let me conduct our first interview, which is asking a lot because investigators are very possessive with their interrogations. However, I convinced them that an outside like me would add another stress factor, and I told them they would get a lot of tips from me. If I did a good job they could mimic me, and if I did poorly, they should do the opposite.

I was setting up the conference room for an interview with one of the victims’ family members whom we know is close to our investigation, Officer Mansour Abdullah. He put on quite a show when he witnessed his niece’s body being removed from the crime scene. Although his manic distress is somewhat understandable, it’s always advisable, if not protocol, to interview a relative that close to the victim. I’ve seen many displays of initial grief and sorrow from both people who were completely innocent and those who ended up being the guilty party, and both have exhibited strange aspects of guilt and innocence. For example, I’ve seen absolutely blameless people close to the victim seemingly cold and indifferent upon hearing the news of their loved ones’ deaths, and some of them even reacted this way when seeing the body removed from the crime scene or when identifying the body at the morgue. Most of them are in such a state of shock that their emotional reaction does not match what we would expect from a grieving person. Who knows, they might break down or fly into hysterics later in private. On the other hand, I’ve witnessed this same reaction from the people we later found out were guilty the entire time. Then, we assume that their lack of an emotional response stems from their callous, heartless nature, which allowed them to commit such a heinous act in the first place.

On the contrary, I have witnessed people launch into great theatrics of grief in front of the entire police force, like Mansour Abdullah, and they, too, have been from both camps – innocent
and guilty. Therefore, I knew we had to assume that anyone related to the victim in any way had to be interviewed. Now, there is a difference between an interview and an interrogation, and the former can transform into the latter quite quickly. An interview is what we start off with, and when we test that person for a specific reaction, we start to use certain tactics that would best be described as an interrogation, by applying pressure, pointing blame, and narrowing the focus of our questions.

As an agent, I didn’t have anything to do with the actual interrogation of suspects. That was for the lead detective in a taskforce. But I wasn’t about to tell them that…after I had convinced them I was the best man for the job. However, I was familiar with situations when an F.B.I. agent was asked to interview a taskforce’s suspect because of how that would appear to the suspect. Oh look, now we’ve invited the F.B.I. to come in and interrogate you! Now, what are you going to do? This does carry a lot of weight and has worked wonders for cases in the past. Detective Khalifa Saeed decided that I could take the lead on some of the interviews…if the subject spoke English well enough, of course. The rest he would handle with me standing by with a translator whenever possible. I was happy about this. If they were going to give me wings, they might as well give me horns, too.

They were bringing their usual suspects that consisted of all kinds of kooks and perverts, but, as worrisome as they were, they didn’t seem to meet the depravity we were looking for. Or they had been locked away already, alibied, or closely monitored by families or hospitals. Among them a lot of incestual molesters, statutory rapists, and domestic abusers. They were a ball of wax all to their own that would have to be dealt with some day, but they weren’t stranger-on-stranger predators.
As for now, I wanted to create a certain look to our “interrogation room,” however, this was going to be very difficult considering where they had put my “headquarters” – a conference room in a fancy hotel. Although some of the makeshift taskforce headquarters I had worked with in the past had been in hotel conference rooms (never as nice as this one), the interviews themselves were always conducted at the police station.

Various police officers were delivering boxes of evidence I had requested to be sent over from the evidence room, some of which I secretly categorized as deaths of a certain nature in hopes of getting my hands on files they hadn’t yet attributed to this killer yet. All the evidence, pictures, and reports were helping to create an atmosphere in the “interrogation room.” I saw Detective Khalifa Saeed helping out, and as he was leading a group of police towards the staging, I asked, “Why aren’t we doing this at your headquarters?”

“We believed that you would be more comfortable here, and we didn’t want the other departments from Dubai or the other cities to get…,” Detective Khalifa Saeed stammered looking for the right word.

“Jealous?” I said, as I opened a cardboard box that contained plastic bags of bloody clothes.

“Yes, perhaps jealous, but they also might ask about your credentials. And we don’t want to discuss that with them right now. Only the directors know concretely about our…arrangement,” he said.

“I understand. This could be a big problem.”

“Yes, mush-cool-ah, big problem,” Khalifa Saeed said as he wheeled in more peg boards I had requested.
“But, you know, if we get closer to a suspect, I don’t think we can do any of this…,” I made a sweeping motion toward the grand room and all the boxes and stacks of data, “…here. It will cause other problems.”

“Other problems?”

“Yes, we are going to need to start keeping some of this information very close to our chest.” I could tell Detective Khalifa Saeed didn’t quite understand what I meant, so I pantomimed hiding something close to my chest and looking around me in all directions like a thief tip-toeing from a jewel heist.

“Oh, you mean keep this secret? But only you and me have access to this room.” Just then a janitor used his skeleton-key to open a door at the far end of the room that I hadn’t even noticed before.

I shot him a look, “You see?”

“I see. Not even the cleaning staff can be in here.”

“That’s right because when this thing starts heating up. The press from all over the world are going to descend upon this place, and it’s just a matter of time before one of these guys, who makes two-cents-an-hour, tells the whole world about the pictures he’s seen pegged up on our wall over there. One of them will take pictures of our pictures and leak them all over the globe.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed looked annoyed – at my description of the worker – and said, “We use dirhams here and fils, not dollars and cents.”

“Okay, whatever, he makes two-fils-an-hour! You get my point.”

“Well, what if we just deny all access to anyone, but you and the police?”

“Detective Saeed, the guy we’re bringing in here today to interview is a fricken’ police officer!”

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“Saeed is my father. My name is Khalifa. Khalifa Saeed,” he said, not so much in offense, or to annoy me, but to set me straight.

I put my arm around his shoulder like a good ol’ pal and said, “Detective Khalifa Saeed, everyone is a suspect. EVERYONE! So, we need to get a better handle on this is all I’m saying. After I give my first seminar, I think you and me, and whoever makes the rules and decisions around here, are going to have to tighten this ship a little bit.” Detective Khalifa Saeed looked dejected, like I had told the birthday boy the jumpy-balloon-castle wasn’t coming. I added, “But, hey, listen, wherever we go, let’s keep the catering. This place makes great sandwiches,” which made Detective Khalifa Saeed’s jumpy-balloon-castle inflate back up a little.

Now that the other officers had finished hauling in the things I requested, and we had shuffled off the cleaning crew that tried to come in, Detective Khalifa Saeed and I were left to create our “interrogation room” out of 15-foot curtains that went to the ceiling, walls of peg boards, and the creative manipulation of track-lighting. Once that was done, Detective Khalifa Saeed sat down and watched me assemble the “room” in a way that would elicit the biggest response from Officer Mansour Abdullah.
Detective Khalifa Saeed piped in, “Let me know what help you need.” I busily ignored him. From the walls we created from curtains beneath the spotlights, I made each peg-board an homage of each victim’s evidence. Placed in the order in which they had likely been killed, the first peg board was “Jane Doe # 1,” who we nicknamed “The Falcon Girl.” Frankly, the raptor after which she was dubbed deserved all the credit for starting this entire investigation. “Girl” because a forensic anthropologist and Dr. Patel agreed that the formation of her hips placed her age between 16 and 25 years of age.

In the photographs, “The Falcon Girl” lies shrunken and dark-skinned on the coroner’s metal slab, her body flipped and snapshot from each angle. Her skin had not decayed so much as dried and tightened to her bones like a mummy or the rind of fruit left in the sun. The mouth and eyeless sockets had pulled back and receded, leaving black pits and a nightmarish outcry from her silent mouth. Around the orifices were small fresh disturbances of the rough skin where the falcon had pecked away at the sunbaked flesh. Both the empty, blackholed orbitals, the stab wounds, and the slashes seemed to pucker inward with slightly curled edges.

The coroner surmised that the killer had sat on her chest with her arms tied or pinned down as he made two deep thrusts downward into her jugular, next to the bones of her neck. A very different position from the victim I inspected in the desert. Although “Falcon Girl” was a Jane Doe, the other detectives assumed that she was originally from Ethiopia or possibly Sudan. Her long, Afro-style hair had not yet fallen away from the skull, and in the picture, it looked dusty, and saturated with sand. Even with the shrinkage of the skin making it difficult to tell what she may have looked like in all of her living beauty, the features of that region of the world are so prominent that they felt safe in making a guess at her country of origin. It surprised me that they
hadn’t discovered her identity yet, but Detective Khalifa Saeed explained that people abandon their positions and overstay their visas, working illegally. In those cases, friends might not realize that a person has gone missing. I found it sad that someone would leave their umbrella of love to go work in complete uncertainty for a foreign country. But maybe I was just feeling sorry for myself because that is exactly what I had done.
The next board was designated for Jane Doe # 2 who happened to be the third body found yet likely the second woman killed (of the ones we discovered and attributed to this UNSUB). We dubbed her “The Bracelet lady” on account of her bracelet. She was older, so they called her a “lady,” and she too was found devoid of any clothes except for an expensive bracelet that had been found lodged deep in her throat by the coroner. Detective Khalifa Saeed thought the killer had forced her to swallow it to humiliate or torture her, but I thought otherwise.

I told them my theory that when she was being assaulted, she might have been abducted, detained, and held against her will. At which point, she might have secretly put the jewelry in her own mouth, thinking initially that she was about to get robbed. I theorized she didn’t want the attacker to see she owned such an expensive piece jewelry, so she used an old streetwise trick to keep it safe. She didn’t realize until it was too late that the killer had no interest in her bracelet.

“The Bracelet Lady” was Asian, most likely from the Philippines. Her body was discovered in the vicinity of the “The Falcon Girl” shortly after they found the first two bodies. The killer had likely placed her corpse a good distance from the first victim, but then became satisfied with the seclusion of his burial ground and felt he didn’t need to bury them that far away from each other for what he wanted to do. An aerial shot taken by a drone, showed that the gravesites were perfectly aligned, almost equidistant apart. I imagined him out there in the desert burying the last body. He must have revisited the first body, then found the second one (perhaps he had marked it with the Coke can we found filled with sand), and then counted the number of strides between them, then buried the last victim smack-dab in the middle; it was that precise.
Chapter 28

(Jane Doe # 3 Bulletin Board - Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Jane Doe # 3, the third one killed, second one found at that dumpsite, was also likely Filipino. She quickly became referred to as “the girl with the missing tattoo.” All three had similar mortal wounds – stomach stabbed, neck stabbed and/or slashed, but Jane Doe # 3 had her own unique wound. She had a perfectly rectangular swath of skin removed just above her right breast. It must have been a tattoo. The killer probably removed it to prolong her identification.

In front of the victim’s bulletin boards, I had laid out the only forensic evidence we had collected on a long fold-out table, the kind you’d find set up at a backyard cookout. Each in their own plastic slip were the gold bracelet, the soda ody, and the wool tent folded up and encased in a burlap bag. Next to the carpet that had lined the tent’s floor was Saarah’s abaya, displayed prominently on top of the table in a plastic, full-length dry-cleaning bag. Next to the evidence, I placed a few props. I had Detective Khalifa Saeed find me similar knives that could have inflicted the damage left on our victims. There were modern hobby-enthusiast knives, but the most probable weapon we agreed, was the khanjar. The coroner agreed the khanjar I flaunted on the table would be the most similar to the actual weapon that caused such horrible incisions in our victims’ abdomens. It made sense that someone killing in this region of the world would choose a historically significant tool such as this. It symbolically fit, and the killer would probably have attached an obsessive compulsive meaning to this weapon.

The last bulletin board was the ace up our sleeve. We knew who this victim was, and we could finally start the victimology of our investigation. Detective Khalifa Saeed promised me that we would soon know the identities of the other Jane Does now that a press release would soon be informing the public that they should come forward with any knowledge of loved ones, colleagues,
or acquaintances they suspect have gone missing. But today was a chance for me to act on a hunch. I might be able to wrap up this investigation right out of the starting gate.

“So, where am I going to be while you interview Officer Mansour Abdullah?” Detective Khalifa Saeed finally asked as I finished my set up for maximum effect.

“I know that you’re familiar with Mansour Abdullah…”

“Yes, we are good friends. I have known him for many years.”

“I know. That is why I think you should be completely out of sight. You say he knows English, right?”

“Very well. Yes.”

“Then I don’t think we need a translator. I have a listening device here, so that you can be in the next room, or if you don’t feel too uncomfortable being sneaky, you can sit right over here behind the curtain…in case something goes wrong.”

“What could go wrong? I’m sure Mansour Abdullah is not going to cause you any problems.”

“Swell, let’s get in our places then, and I will start the recording device so that you can listen in. Then, it’s lights, camera, action.”
Chapter 29

Del Tor interviews Officer Mansour Abdullah, the transcripts of which are Appendix 3.
Chapter 30

(Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Rm. 402)

When they told Del Toro his interviewing tactics had been a little too forceful and maybe even offensive, it made him clench his jaw and march out of the building, smoldering. His temper certainly wouldn’t win him any poker tournaments, but he couldn’t hide his exasperation. They wanted the F.B.I.’s help but didn’t want to ask for it, so they settled for him instead. Beggars can’t be choosier, and they should take what they could get. He was all they had, and they should face it. It hadn’t happened too many times when he was in the Bureau because most police forces welcome the F.B.I.’s help, but they are not required to take it. This wouldn’t be the first time an investigator had been slighted. In fact, John Douglas, the father of Criminal Profiling, who literally wrote the book, has talked openly about being asked to back off cases before, but Del Toro felt personally slighted. This was definitely the least qualified police force to scoff at his expertise…even if he was the least qualified profiler. They had essentially zero experience with real stranger-on-stranger murder, not with a real UNSUB who deviated from the herd.

Del Toro had looked into it, and there have been some professionally orchestrated murders in the U.A.E., but this was different. This discarding of women like trash, displaying the last one like a sculpture shaped by rigor. This deep thrust of the knife was to create new orifices. It was the use of the killing instrument as a replacement of the phallus. THIS, this he could guarantee, the U.A.E. had never experienced before. It’s a dreadful experience for even a seasoned police force! And they were not it. This would continue without his help!

He stormed into the lobby and barreled his way through the oblivious guests and their flock of whiny children waiting around the lounge divans. Being benched made him want to shout to everyone within earshot, “You’re in for a real surprise!” but he kept his jaw tight and made his way into the gift shop.
It was times like these when he was weakest, when his eye would wander and his lips could practically taste in the air the two most detrimental forces for lawmen…and artists, those two temptations that had cut many an agent better than him so low, and destroyed creatives like himself before they reached their prime – the drink, and women. He promised Amanda he would never hurt her again, but when he was this far away from her, this far away from his real responsibilities of being a breadwinner and caretaker, the old siren song in his head came calling. It was such a sweet seductive song, even his better voice of reason – his old pal Brenda – couldn’t drown out the temptation with her ghostly whispers into his temporal-lobe.

“What do you think of that, Bren?” he muttered, holding up a pair of swimming trunks checkered with prints of every Marvel character imaginable, knowing Amanda would point out how short, obnoxious, and inappropriately juvenile they were for someone his age. But Brenda, Brenda, his childhood sweetheart, would counter that Bermuda length shorts were out of style and that Marvel characters had replaced DC comic’s hipness at the moment. In other words, these shorts were trending. “I can get away with these?” Sure, sure you can. You’ve been working out.

He shouldn’t even be by the pool. “I should be working on a profile..to show them they’re making a big mistake. But, hey, they’re going to sideline me? Then, I’ll really take a knee and sit this one out,” he mumbled.

“What was that, sir?” the shopkeeper asked, “How can I help you?”

“Sorry, talking to myself. Bad habit.”

“No problem, sir. Take your time.” The store was filled with kitschy knickknacks Amanda would adore – his-and-her Emirati salt-shakers, him wearing the white kandura and ghutra, her wearing the black abaya and burqa, both wearing sunglasses, camels everywhere – gilded camels with bedazzled humps that opened like jewelry boxes, camels painted with the Dubai skyline,
camels on keychains, cupholders, lighters. There were playing cards authenticated to contain 24 kt. gold foil. But the interesting items were the antiques. They looked real enough. If they were fake, they were well worth the charade – working ancient handcuffs, patinated greenish-brown, intricately carved teak and mahogany incense holder, chairs, Quran stands – all from wood that would probably get confiscated the second he stepped foot into the States for being hewn from an endangered tropical species in India or Bangladesh. Then something caught his eye, took his breath away. *Khanjars.* Shelves of them, behind glass. “These are popping up all over the place, Bren. Don’t you think?” He called for the proprietor, “Hey maestro, how much are these over here.”

The jovial Indian clerk came over again, eager to make a sale, “Oh so many, so many. Different price. You can find any price you need.”

Del Toro pointed to the most authentic looking one, one that looked as if it had been held in place by a long Bedouin cloth worn about the waist of a real man who had used it for God-knows-what in the past. From his readings about tribal warfare in this area, it could have been used to murder a marauding clan of neighbors, or it might have simply cut dates down from a palm tree. But it certainly looks like it had been utilized.

The keeper said, “Good taste, good taste! You choose best one…but most expensive. This one is antique collection.”

“How much?”

“Thousand *dirhams*…but, but, I give you good price, good price just for you. Eight-hundred dirhams!”
Del Toro made the conversion from dirhams to dollars in his head. Slightly more than two-hundred dollars. He whistled one long note that went up and then back down, the universal sound for “too expensive.”

The shopkeeper was beginning to panic; watching his sale slip away, he started double-talking, “Any price you want to spend. This one a real one. We have the fake one here, see. Many. The fake one are more beautiful, shinier, and more ornate. This old one is dull and no shine.”

“Oh, but that makes it cool, doesn’t it?”

The shopkeeper looked discouraged to admit it, “Yes, yes. This is true.”

Del Toro struck, “The trunks, this Snickers, a bottle of water, and the knife – six hundred dirhams!”

The Indian man, wearing one of the traditional tunics sold in the store, wobbled his head sideways, which in translation could mean just about anything, before he spoke up, “Okay, but I make no profit today, no profit,” but the satisfied look on his face made Del Toro feel like he had just been had. He should have said five-fifty.

Somehow, he managed to sneak in the elevator alone when a disorganized family became distracted by one of their wayward kids. He unsheathed the knife when the doors closed and brandished it, thrust it sternward and across as expertly as his training from a decade ago would allow. When the elevator halted, it dinged just in time for him to put it away. The doors opened up for a family of four dressed for the pool. Del Toro shrugged his shoulders and said, “Sorry. Going up.”

Once in his room, he breathed a sigh of relief. Though the longing for his wife and son blended with his frustration at having been slighted by his hosts, the magical orderliness of the hotel room – laundry from the night before folded rather than on the floor, drinking glasses back on the tray
by the sink, two sealed bottles of water, and a small rectangle of mint chocolate – made him feel some relief. He hated to admit it, but he felt free from all obligations and duties. A sense of worry niggled at him, but the thought of Amanda being back in the care of his self-congratulatory mother-in-law cut the burden of guilt to a minimal degree. He hadn’t felt this uninhibited – despite the looming specter of his job there in the U.A.E. – since, since, well, never. At least never in his professional adulthood.

It scared him. The unrestricted suction of the bar downstairs, exacerbated by being told today after the interview, “Thank you for your…guidance today in questioning a…member of the victim’s family. We’ll be in touch at the end of the weekend…to…decide where you will…fit best.”

He walked over to the window and noticed the lights and the nightlife at the hotel already starting to shimmer to life, reminding him of fireflies at a cookout back home. With the waning sunset reflecting off the opulent megalith that was his hotel, Del Toro laid claim with is eyes to a white-slatted lounge chair down below. He could see, even this high up and the windows clouded with a fine crust of sea-salt, that it was capable of reclining to a fully supine position. He pointed at the lounger with his finger squeaking on the glass as if to inform the world that he would soon be down there in his loud swimming trunks.

But he didn’t go. He fell back into his billowy comforter, miraculously fluffed by diligent hotel staff in his absence. He was undressed from the waist down, wearing only underwear and his dress-shirt, still strangled in the black tie knotted about his neck. As he fought to get it off, it reminded him of his former duty to keep people alive. It also reminded him that that duty was not completely his…as a fake agent. He yanked out of his tie, threw it at the T.V. and grumbled, “Given the weekend off! On a serial case, Brenda! Can you believe it!” He grabbed the stack of
folders he’d taken from his makeshift taskforce room downstairs and contemplated whether he should do as the Roman do, which seemed to be nothing, or actually do some work. The bed’s immediate comfort was looking more enticing when his cellphone rang. He looked at his beat reflection in the screen before he answered it.

“What are you calling for?” he asked with a snap that didn’t come off the way he wanted.

“I’ve been worried about you!” Amanda snapped back, “I can’t call you now?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I was just getting ready to start doing some thinking, and ” he had to come up with something quickly, “I meant there are other ways to speak to each other…for free.”

“You want to Facetime or Zoom or whatever?”

“Mmm, how about next time?” he heard her *hmph* in disappointment and he asked, “So, what were you so worried about?”

“That you didn’t call me back!”

“I couldn’t call you back; it was the middle of the night there”

“Yeah, but you could have called me in the morning…my morning.”

“By that point, I was at work, Mandy,” he got up, pointed at the lounge chair waiting for him downstairs again, and said, “Do you think I’m here on vacation? I’m at work now, you know. Real work, again. Important work. Lives are at stake!”

“You haven’t really told me about your digs. Ohhh, is the hotel swanky? It must be swanky.”

“No, babe, it’s totally no frills,” he lied.

“Like a Quinta Inn or something?”

“Slightly better,” he said, as he scanned the lush grounds framing a path that led to the even more-exclusive Shangri-La Resort.
“What’s it called? I’ll look it up. Oh, better yet, send me some pictures, oh, oh, or some videos!” she said, and he winced, knowing she’d be jealous.

“Ah, but I’ve hardly explored the place. Too busy, “ he changed the subject quickly, hoping she’d forget but knowing full well she’d sooner starve the baby than do that, “Hey, put the little guy on.”

“He can’t talk; he’s an infant, for Pete’s sake.”

“Just put him on,” he waited till he thought he could make out the heavy breathing of a baby, “Hey, there, Cole!” How’s my son? You’re the man of the house while I’m gone…Okay? You’re the man,” he got choked-up somehow, remembering his dad saying the same thing to his older brother when his parents separated. That was the day he realized that even a jar of lizards that scrambled endlessly up the glass until they turned to skeletons, dried in place in his backyard, that all life was precious to the living. He had forgotten about them, just left them to die. At least his father hadn’t saddle him with the burden of being the man of the house, and at least he never forgot about them when he left. That’s probably the only things that saved him.

Amanda got back on the line, “Okay, that’s enough of that. He doesn’t know what’s going on, he’s like, Get that damn thing out of my face, Mommy!”

“Mandy, tell your mother I said hello and that I appreciate her being there.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got to go”

“I got to get something to eat.”

“Can’t you stay a little longer?” she purred.

“Oh, I can’t. I’m starving,” more like thirsty, he thought, “And this call is costing us a jillion dollars.”

“Hot there?”
“Yes, it’s hot. Of course, it’s hot, baby,” he said as he noticed his phone light up, “In fact, I got an important call on the other line. I have to go.”

“Oh, fine. Love you, Sweetie,” she said, “We both do! Remember to ask your new sponsors if we can come!” she rushed to say before he could hand up. He told her he loved her, too as he switched over to the other line.

“Hello, Director Harrison, I know it’s been a long time, and you’ve probably made a lot of concessions to answer my request to contact me after all these years, but can I call you back in fifteen minutes? I’m in the middle of something vital right now.” He hung up without hearing a confirmation from his former boss, the ex-lover who had embroiled him in the scandal that gotten him fired. Nothing happened to her, of course, even though she was the one who had latched onto him, the Latin lover from the wrong side of the States, the bright young upstart, an anomaly among her blue-bloods, rough and special like an uncut gem or an uncouth show pony

Wow. Phones.

Phones were great for such sidestepping. He’d bought himself enough time to map things out…down by the pool.
Chapter 31

(Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Poolside)

You’ve come here to scope, to stake out. It’s not the most popular spot for Westerners to hang out, but you’re not too partial to crowds anyway. If you want that kind of nonsense, you’d have to drive all the way to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel and go to that ridiculous Tikki-bar club they have downstairs where all the wait-staff wear Hawaiian shirts and leis around their necks. Where the pop music from one generation younger than the patron’s mean age might just be worse than the sweaty, dancing crowd bumping into you from every direction, breathing down your neck as you wait at the bar to order a drink. Just to have it spilled down the front of your shirt the second you turn around by one of the hot chicks you’ve come to ogle – women who are at least two divisions out of your league. And the last time you went there, the bouncers weren’t letting in men unaccompanied by women. So, you wandered around the lobby looking for a woman, any woman, you could invite for a drink downstairs in the obnoxious club, so you wouldn’t have to wait in line at the risk of never being let in at all.

You finally found one that looked promising, and then you couldn’t muster up the courage to ask her if she’d drape herself across your arm, act as an imposter date for the mere time it would take to traipse across the club’s threshold. When you saw a gaggle of women dressed-up and parading towards the front of the line, you narrowed in on the least impressive one. You opened your mouth to make your proposition, and the only thing that came out were a stuttering series of C-C-Cees, meant to be the beginning of Can you please... that never quite materialized, but the frumpy woman already sweating through her make-up realized what you were doing. She put on a pouty face of sympathy, and hooked her arm around yours, saving you the humiliation of having to make your play. Her friends sneered at you, then at her for taking in such a starving, pathetic dog as yourself. And you could barely keep your jaw from clenching and your hands from shaking.
in anger as you pulled out the cover charge. They were gouging the men but not the women. You were angry you had to go through that trial of humiliation to begin with. And you were angry at yourself for feeling you had to sneak over to Dubai to witness Westerners of that caliber in their element, an element where you didn’t belong. You should have just stayed home that day, perhaps today too, but it’s too late. You are here.

You asked around, did a little research, and found him easily. You sidle up next to him, and he doesn’t even notice you. He’s too involved in his conversation on the phone. As a foreigner, he probably assumes you’re a foreigner too, that you don’t speak the same language as him. Kids are splashing around in the blood warm sea water in lieu of the pool just behind you. You don’t understand why anyone would choose to get sand in every crevice of their body instead of diving into the refreshing, climate-controlled water of the saline pool.

You hear the entire conversation, one-sided of course, but you hear it just the same. He’s trying to speak low, but he can’t speak too low or he won’t be heard over the long-distance line. You listen to him say, “Morning, Ms. Roebeck, Director Harrison, please. She’s expecting me, I believe.” There’s a pause, and you’re wondering if he’s listening to someone speak on the other end or if he’s been put on hold, when you hear him say, finally, “Sure, put me through…Morning, Director Harrison,” you notice him stiffen up talking to this person and you snicker, thinking you would have probably done the same thing if you were talking to a director-of-something seven thousand miles away who couldn’t even see you. You’re missing what he’s saying because the ambiance music seemed to go up in volume, but you’ve heard this name before. Where do you know this Director Harrison from?

You listen to him continue, “Yeah, they had me in the field today, but I’m get the feeling I’m being benched already…’until further notice,’ as they put it. At least until after the
weekend…Yeah, weekends start on Thursday here…I maaaay have pissed in their falafel a little bit, but I’m telling you, I was just playing the role I thought they wanted me to play; they’re pretty touchy here. They’re all wound up like a jack-in-the-box over some things and don’t give a damn about other things…They got me in a conference room; can you believe it?” You take the pause in the conversation to sip the remnants of your cocktail. You grip your glass to quiet the ice-cubes from clinking when he starts talking again. You hope you’re not leaning too close as you eavesdrop, hearing him say, “I had to threaten to fly home if they didn’t let me onto the scene, which went well enough. Then, I convinced them to let me question a relative of one of the victims, and that’s when things went a little south. I shouldn’t have pushed him so hard…Are you sure they asked for me specifically? I find that hard to believe…So, if this American girl, yeah, Britney Sommers. If she turns up deceased, you’ll bring in the whole team, right?...And then this whole thing is out of my hands, correct?...One more question, can I be charged for impersonating a peace officer for this?...No, when I get out of here, I have no interest in pursuing law enforcement again...Yes, I’m very sure. I’m doing fine as I am.”

You watch him eye a bikini clad beauty walk by, and the condensation on the glass makes his drink slip out of his hand into his lap. This time you stifle a laugh, but he pulls himself together so as not to be noticed by this Director Harrison on the other end of line. The conversation continues, “I guess we don’t want to wish for that, obviously. But until another body turns up and they realize the shit storm they’re in, they’ve literally got me lounging by the pool,” you watch your target hold up his cocktail, gesturing to the waiter for another round.

Then you hear something that makes you flinch, “Actually, I feel like I got eyes on me, and it’s not because I look good in my trunks, either…No, I don’t know who it is, maybe it’s them? Maybe they don’t trust me, and they got someone tailing me.” You quickly duck your head like
a man wallowing in his drink as he scans the man-made beach, cranes his neck around and surveys the poolside bar where you’re sitting, then passes his eyes over the patio restaurant full of diners.

He doesn’t seem to pay you any mind before he continues, “Maybe I’m just nuts; maybe no one’s following me at all. Shit, maybe everyone here right now is watching, but I wouldn’t know what the hell for, they’re not letting me do anything…Anyway, they want me to give an initial seminar of the material we have so far after the weekend…Okay, I’ll keep you posted…Hey, Larissa, I’m glad you’re helping me with this. I couldn’t do it without you..You, too. Goodbye, Director Harrison. By the way, they told me you put in a good word for me…I appreciate it.”
Chapter 32

(Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Outdoor Lounge)

To have things done unto you is to live in the passive voice of someone else. The object of the action is made most important, and the actor of the action is put last. That life would not be lived by him anymore. A step into the limelight away from the shadows would be taken by Alan Barret tonight; this is a promise made unto himself.

The writer’s brazen nakedness barely concealed by the starched, white pool towel draped over his shoulders is noted by Alan, envied, along with his calves, his legs – legs of a runner, a sprinter. Not the lean emaciation formed by long distance endurance, but those honed by quick spurts of power, like those of a thoroughbred Arabian horse. That he still looks the part of an agent impresses Alan. The approach is just about to be made to engage Del Toro in light banter, a contrived “chance” meeting he’s orchestrated to take place as they stand in the lobby, when the elevator’s sudden arrival from the basement dings open and welcomes Del Toro inside before Alan can spring into action.

The failure felt by Alan as he stands there watching the elevator rise up to an unknown floor is exasperating, yet typical for him.

The wait takes an hour before he thinks the target is spotted, coming down the elevator and heading towards the outside lounge instead of passing through the lobby. Relief fills his lungs at the sight of Del Toro, finally at rest, elbows on the bar behind him as he looks out onto the dancefloor of Salsa Night.

The fit, good-looking, young professionals crowding the patio bar are taken in by Alan as he moves closer to the…writer? Closer to the ex-special agent? Yes, closer to the ex-special agent. The stress he’d felt just moments before has been replaced by the thumping tempo of good vibes and a flirtatious energy around him. A deep breath is taken and composure washes over
Alan, who takes a seat next to the celebrity author who will one day make him famous. His elbow has accidentally bumped Del Toro’s on purpose. The manly comment is made, “Sorry about that, buddy.”

The chance he has manufactured has finally settled in his lap, “Hey, are you American?”

A side-eyed glance is thrown, “What gave it away?”

“Come on, once we Yankees open our mouths…,” the barstool is abandoned by Alan to face Del Toro, “…it’s a dead giveaway.”

“I could be Canadian, couldn’t I?”

“Not by the way you said, ‘sorry’ instead of ‘sore-ree.’”

“Nor did I say ‘aBOOT’,” a smile has yet to be produced, “Suppose you’re right though, I could only be American…because I’m too mean to be Canadian.”

“Are you now?”

“Oh yeah, I’m a real Dirty Harry.”

“I come here a lot, and I’ve never seen you around. You must be new to the Emirates. Or are you just passing through?”

“Quite the dancer then, are you?”

A laugh has been tricked out of Alan, who almost spills his beer, “No, no, I just come for the view.” The lively scene with the Grand Mosque across the water is momentarily paid tribute by both of them.

“Yeah, you could say that again.”

“Just passing through?”

“As soon as possible.”
An accomplishment he hasn’t felt too often draws near as he raises his right hand to shake, “I’m Alan. Nice to meet you.” The utmost caution is taken by Alan not to reveal his last name in case Del Toro has done his homework and recognizes his name.

“Likewise,” but the same caution isn’t taken by the former agent, who introduces himself like James Bond, “Ramon. Ramon Del Toro.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” the acting performed in the elevator has improved significantly as he’s genuinely impressed to be shaking Del Toro’s iron fist, “THE Ramon Del Toro?”

The foul expression on Del Toro’s face has brought sweat beads to Alan’s brow, “What do you mean, ‘THE’ Del Toro?”

The point of no return has been crossed, “I thought that was you!”

“What on God’s green earth are you talking about? I’ve never been recognized on the street of America! How would you know me?”

“First of all, we’ve met before, but just like I wasn’t sure it was you, I’m sure you wouldn’t remember me either, but yeah, we attended the same seminars.”

Disbelief could not have oozed more wretchedly from Del Toro’s face, “YOU went to the academy?”

“No, no, don’t be ridiculous, man! I could never do that,” Del Toro’s intense stare hasn’t wavered from Alan’s eyes as he takes a drink to look away,

“Literary seminars?”

“No, no, at University of Texas.”

“At Austin?”

“No, El Paso.”
“You know me from undergrad?” Del Toro’s interest has surely been piqued, stepping off
his stool now, too, to stand face-to-face with the slighter Alan, “How?”

“You were a senior, and I was a sophomore. As a student, I watched you a few times on
the debate team, and I once asked you a question from the audience.”

“Well, I’ll be goddamned! That’s nuts.”

“But really, what are YOU talking about? You’re famous these days! Don’t you know
that,” the disconnected look has returned to Del Toro’s face, as Alan elaborates, “You know, down
in Baton Rouge.” Del Toro still has not been convinced of his reputation by Alan, “Come on, your
name was all over the wire when Baton Rouge had three serial killers working the same area at the
same time. You provided a statement to the press.”

“What? You don’t know me from my books? I was hoping you recognized me from my
books. How do you even know something like that? Are you so kind of serial killer groupie or
something?”

“Yeah, of course. I’m mean, no, man, I’m a journalist…for the Khaleej Times here. I
mean, no I’m not a serial killer groupie, ah, ah, I mean, yeah, of course I know you from your
books, but I also know you from your work with the Bureau. From a long time ago.”

“Oh, okay…that’s just…weird. I…I didn’t think I’d have to keep such a low profile here.”

“Yeah, celebrities come here all the time for that very reason. They aren’t as easily noticed
here as they would be in the States, so they come here and get wild.”

“One can get ‘wild’ here in the U.A.E.?”

Del Toro’s attention has been stolen by the first of a series of beautiful women who
coquettishly bat their eyelashes in his direction, swaying to the music, and sipping their drinks.
The attempt to get him back almost goes unnoticed, “Sure, you can get wild here! Do you know
how much money runs through this place? If you have money in the U.A.E., you can have a fucking blast!”

“I suppose that’s true of everywhere, isn’t it?

“Yeah, but not if every Joe Blow is coming up and tugging on your shirt sleeve, begging for a selfie.”

“You’re not going to ask to take a selfie with me, are you?”

“Well, not anymore.”

“An autograph?”

“Come on, you’re not that famous,” the jab made by Alan felt good to make even if it wasn’t felt by Del Toro.

“That’s good…because I have terrible penmanship.”

“Not really, of course I would love an autograph, but I don’t want it on a napkin or something dumb like that.”

“Okay, I have a book in my room if you remind me later.”

The ruse has to be maintained by Alan, “So, what are you doing here?” as if he didn’t already know.

“I’m just passing through.”

“Giving a seminar or something like at that Festival of Literature.”

“Like I said, I’m just passing through, but yeah, something like that.”

“Hey, Gilbert,…” the bartender’s name is used by Alan. It doesn’t go unnoticed that the bartender seems surprised by the use of his name uttered so flippantly as if they were friends, “…another one for me and my friend here.”

“Oh, no, no, I shouldn’t.”
“They got you working tomorrow? That’s strange. It’s their holy day.”

“Ha, the funny thing is they DON’T have me working tomorrow.”

All the niceties have disappeared from Alan’s face, “I know why you’re here. I know why you’re really here.” All the surrounding gaiety of the raucous dance floor falls silent in the ears of Del Toro, and Alan feels for a fleeting tick of the clock that he has just given himself away. However, the will to fight seems to fade in Del Toro’s face just as the music dies down for one beat before pounding into the next song. A mighty swig of beer is siphoned from the long neck of a beer left unattended by the guy standing next to them and is clanked menacingly into Alan’s cocktail, partially spilling in his lap, “Yeah…yeah, I suppose you know exactly why I’m here.” A pleased, accomplished look spreads across Alan’s face until Del Toro grabs his shoulder in his steely grip and asks, “But what are you doing here. Have you been stalking me all day?”

A whisper is attempted by Alan as he leans in, “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Del Toro’s ear is cupped by his hand because of the music, “What’s that?”

“I said I’ve got a surprise for you,” Alan says and an eyebrow is cocked in confusion by Del Toro. Then, a smile of glee emerges on Alan’s face when he reveals, “I’m the one.”

A sneer escapes Del Toro’s already compromised demeanor, “Come again?”

“I’m the one,” has been repeated, “I’m the one they’re looking for.” Alan’s physique is scanned in one glance by Del Toro as Alan motions once again for him to come in close. A kiss, a secret, or the stab of the knife are the choices Del Toro expects, but begrudgingly he obliges and leans in anyway.

“I’m the one who got you here,” says Alan, which shocks Del Toro out of his seat. A stance of a combat has been assumed, but Alan has grabbed him by the shoulders as he gets right up to his ear, “Don’t tell anyone, but I’m the one who leaked the story to the New York Tribune.
I’m the *anonymous source.*” The composure of the Del Tore returns to his face, like he’s been pardoned from an execution. Money is slapped on the bar for Gilbert the bartender. Del Toro’s arm is hooked by his new friend, and Alan says, “Follow me.”
Chapter 33

(Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Near the Corniche)

I’m walking slightly behind this sinewy guy I’ve supposedly met before because he seems eager to take me out on the town, but I’m calling bullshit. I’ve never met this dude. I always remember a face, especially one as distinct as this guy’s. It’s what my dad would have called a hatchet-face, pockmarked and gaunt, long aquiline nose just like the blade of an ax. Maybe I have met him; who knows, perhaps the years have been hard on him and he’s wearing it as best as he can. He looks like a young Mick Jagger or a Willem Defoe, but taller, gangly and jagged-boned. But I know not to be fooled by that. I don’t miss the muscles tugging and pulling like pistons beneath his taut skin and bulging at the forearms, the biceps, the shoulders, forming a broad triangular back for such a thin guy. Much like a fighter in the Bantam weight class, he shouldn’t be undersold.

Maybe he’s not as ugly as I take him for. My wife always points out how attractive certain guys are to some women just because they’re unusual or unique looking, like this guy. I can never see that in guys. Traditional beauty, sure, I can spot that, who can’t? But with this guy? He must really have to put on the charm. Which he seems to have in droves.

I wasn’t used to hanging out with this type when I was a lawman – all artsy and rock-star-water-walking. But in the literary circuit, I run into more like him. Like all walks of life, I suppose, lawmen get caught up in a spinning circle of friends. They all have the same law enforcement hobbies, and they can’t break its whirlpool. Anyone could spot a lawman by their haircuts, their tucked in polos and khakis. They compete with each other to be beefy and fit, well-prepared and athletic out of peer pressure to be tough. Lawmen tell themselves that if a bullet goes through a door, then through a car seat, then into their meaty flesh, it might not make it all the way to their vitals if better pack on a little more muscle. This mindset has stuck with me a little over the
years…out of vanity, but I’ve let my hair get a little shaggy, got a little softer in the belly when
my law enforcement friends started distancing themselves from me.

I’m sizing Alan up because I size up everyone; Lawmen lose a tincture of trust in humanity
every crime scene they see. That I haven’t lost. This guy seems more like an undercover vice cop.
The sleeper cell agent who goes all in, who method acts on the job alongside the urchins of society
we raise our children to avoid, shielding our baby’s eyes with our hands when pass one of these
lowlifes on the street, all strung-out, all unraveled and exposed. When you’re in law enforcement,
you might not see undercover agents for weeks, months at a time. Every now and then they crawl
back to the surface of their normal agent routine and try to put back the pieces they lost when they
were being someone else. But it’s hard for them to crawl in and out of skins. The sludge stays
with them.

I think I would have made a good undercover.

As a journalist, I think this Alan guy has played one himself from time to time. Must have.
I don’t know why, but I’ve taken an immediate shine to the guy. And I don’t like it. The alcohol
is steaming through my nostrils, sweating through my pours. The humidity is so thick as we walk
to his car at the far end of the parking lot that I’m soaked through to my socks and underwear. He
waves me over to the passenger side of a nice sand-colored Jeep Cherokee. I climb inside and
notice it’s trashed. I can’t cast too much judgement. Mine looks the same back home, old papers,
scattered fast-food remnants, dried baby vomit – signs of a busy man on the go is my excuse.

It’s slightly disconcerting not knowing where I am but figure I could always tell a taxi the
name of my hotel if I get abandoned or feel like I should cut this guy loose. Soon, he informs me
we’re by the Corniche, points out the obvious – that it runs along the ocean. Lavish cars with paint
jobs that probably cost more than my house snake through the streets near the hotels. Traffic is
atrocious. On the smaller roads, the right of way doesn’t seem to mean much. People are honking their horns incessantly. He tells me that Emiratis and other Arabs stay-up all night during Ramadan, gorging themselves with iftar dinners until the early morning call-to-prayer around 4:30 in the morning. Then, they sleep as much as they can throughout the day; it makes it easier for them to fast if they aren’t awake. I’m just taking it all in, feeling comfortable being with another American like myself.

I finally ask, though I don’t really care, “Where we headed?”

“Know a place. That hotel tax can break the bank,” then he asks as an afterthought, “Like shrimp?”

“I thought everyone liked shrimp.”

“Making sure you’re not going to die on me…” he replies, “…because of some shellfish allergy.”

“Naw, I’m from the generation before all that weak-gene bullshit.”

“Good. You’re going to love this place.”

We drive for a while, and I finally get to the point, “Aren’t you afraid of getting arrested or something? Deported at least?”

“What? For driving while intoxicated in a country that doesn’t allow drinking? Naw, I do it all the time.”

“Ahhh, well that too, I guess, but no. That other thing.”

He’s slightly taken aback by the question, then says, “I don’t see how they could arrest me, really,” after winding through so many roads I have since lost count, he pulls to a stop near a sandy lot with a large crowd of people standing next to what looks like a prefab office, the kind a contractor uses as his headquarters at a construction site. He continues his thought, mid-park,
“Sure, they got a law about defaming the country and its sheikhs, but I made sure not to do that. They hate bad press, and we were warned not to write about the killings by our editor. But I don’t see how my story puts any blame on the U.A.E. or their fearless leaders.”

“I’m not sure they’d see it that way, pal.”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure they’d see it that way, either.” We both have a drunken laugh, and when we climb out of the car, I have to stuff an old McDonald’s bag that fell out back under the passenger seat before I close the door and start following him towards the crowd waiting in line for Styrofoam plates of shrimp and rice. Then, he says in all seriousness, “That’s why I wrote the article anonymously.” Alan turns and stops me in my sandy footprints, jabbing a finger in my chest, saying, “You’re not going to turn me in are you?”

I look at his finger, then look him in the eyes, “That’s a good way to lose a finger.”

He instantly recognizes the weight-class differential, “Sorry…but you’re not, are you?”

“How do you know they don’t know who you are already? I felt like they’ve had eyes on me all day. But now that I’ve run into you, who’s to say they weren’t watching you?” I say and Alan cocks an eyebrow as if to say, Good point.

We take a seat on a curb next to the dusty lot, eating our hangover food with the most brittle plastic forks in the fast-food market. Meanwhile, like the kids in my neighborhood used to play football in the streets, a pick-up game of cricket unfolds before us in a sandy lot. I’ve never seen the sport played before in my life.

Alan says, “So, you’re not writing a book are you? They got you here doing something else, don’t they?”

“Where’d you get that idea?”
“Haha, I can see it in your face! Plus, you said they don’t have you working tomorrow and you seemed annoyed. So, I figured, you’re not working for the Literature Festival. They’ve got you doing something else. Something you used to be good at, don’t they?”

I fill my mouth with a spoonful of rice and shrimp that’ll take me ten minutes to swallow down. Finally, I answer, “Naw, naw, they just got me running seminars. That’s all. After the weekend.”

I’m relieved when Alan moves on from the subject, “Normally, I’d think it was strange that they’re not trying to wring every last dirham out of you like they do the rest of us, but then again, it’s Ramadan. They only work hard at not working during Ramadan.”

“I sort of noticed that,” I say. Then, a Range Rover with a young Emirati behind the wheel pulls up to the restaurant, double-parks the wrong way against traffic, and blares his horn incessantly until a rotund Bangladeshi trots out and takes the man’s order through the driver’s side window.

Alan cocks his chin toward the transaction in front of us, “They have nannies and manservants do all their heavy lifting. We got a passport that can take us almost anywhere, and once we get tired of taking their shit and not even the money is good enough to make us stay, we can fly back to our lovely-if-not-fucked-up-in-its-own-way, good ol’ U. S. of A.,” he nods towards the Bangladeshi man who is now being berated by the Emirati in the Range Rover for reasons unknown, “You think that guy can say the same thing?”

“So, that’s how it works here, huh?”

“You haven’t noticed yet?

“Yeah, I have seen indications, but I didn’t realize it was so widespread.”
“And you’re rubbing noses with the worst of them.” We finish up our shrimp and rice and walk it over to a brimming trashcan while an Escalade full of bearded men in *kanduras* toss their bags of Styrofoam plates and sporks out the window, littering the street.

“What do you mean *the worst of them*?”

“Oh boy! Don’t you know? Every little Emirati boy wants to be a police officer here! The women? They grow up and get Masters and Ph.D’s in science and shit these days just so they can get married to one of those pricks and have a hundred babies! You see all these guys, look around. I bet every one of them is trying to be a police officer right now.”

“Why is that?”

“Think about it, Gumshoe!”

“I’m not a Gumshoe anymore.”

“Whatever, pal, but listen, there’s no crime here, man! None! Zero, nada, zilch, *mafî*.”

“What about the guy in your article?”

“Well,...I mean comparatively so.”

“Might have been that way before,” I say as I get up and start heading back towards his car, “but not so much now, is it?”

“Look, police officers make a hundred grand or more here. To do what? To take naps in their patrol cars under a palm tree! And they retire at forty-five years old with a full pension.”

“You sure all this shit you’ve heard about them isn’t exaggerated?”

“They don’t even pull people over for speeding or for other traffic offenses here. While you’ve been here, you haven’t seen cars drive by with their two-year-old hanging out of the sunroof? That’s if they leave the cheetah at home. They got cameras that cite you on seven
different violations in an instant. Look over there,” Alan points out a speed camera next to the traffic light; it’s a sleek, cylindrical monolith.

“It’s actually a good idea. Would save a lot of good cops from getting shot back home.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t catch jack in terms of real crimes being committed, would it? Oh no, here, you’ll get a text message a day or two later, saying you didn’t have your seatbelt on or you were using your cellphone while driving. Do you think these guys are getting shot at domestic-disputes-gone-wrong, or caught in a crossfire between the Bloods and the Crips? That shit does exist here, but minimally. Sure, it happens to some extent, but compared to our country, it is virtually non-existent. That’s why you’re here right now. This is a whole new animal to them. You’re a whole new animal to them.”

“It was bound to happen.”

“Said the same thing the second I got here. Let’s go have round two.”

“Taking me to another hotel?”

“No, we’re going behind the hotel!”
The summer the former F.B.I. agent met the journalist was the third hottest year in recorded history, and although Del Toro was trying hard to gain his sea legs in this foreign quagmire and navigate an investigation before it jettisoned itself on the rocks of the unsolvable, he never expected he’d be rubbing up against the slimy underbelly with such a seasoned barnacle as Alan Barret, who quite obviously had patronized this hidden bar before. It was connected to the Hilton in the rear, but you could not enter it from anywhere inside the main hotel. You had to exit the main entrance and walk around to the dimly-lit side. Alan led the way, unabashed by the conspicuousness of his skin color. His was sunless, pasty Caucasian while everyone who stared at them as they enter was either of an Arab persuasion or doused with that dark, charcoal-tinted melanin common among certain South Asians – Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Indians. Meanwhile, Del Toro’s skin blushed bright red when the black painted walls and burley bouncers made it clear that they had just walked into the impossible – a strip club in the Middle East.

The jangly instruments and girlish falsetto of Bollywood music vibrated his teeth and shattered his nerves. The narrow entrance corridor opened up into a large club that wrapped around the stage like an amphitheater. Along the back, curving wall was a pillared area where more customers were obscured at tables set in the shadiest part of an already dark room. The entire club, except for the red tablecloths, was painted strip-joint black. Men, mostly Arabs, sat around a stage that featured a catwalk amid a phalanx of tables. The rest of the patrons were rough-looking South Asians that Alan racist-ly lumped together as “Pakis.” A Western lesbian couple with identical crewcuts canoodled beneath the pillared section. As they stared into each other’s eyes, one’s gelled hairdo could have been the mirrored reflection of the other.
Del Toro’s self-consciousness for slumming it seemed to be unfounded as no one looked up from their drinks. As uncomfortable as strip clubs were for Del Toro in the States, the scene he witnessed here was even more unsettling. On stage, replicas of the same woman dressed in different, cheap party dresses stood in a line, dancing with all the vigor of lobotomized mental patients. Alan took one of the tables in back, near the lesbian couple. A bucket of Coronas was brought to them without being ordered, and Del Toro understood that this was their cover charge.

“Where the hell am I?” the expression on Del Toro’s face was simultaneously curious glee and confused horror, “Are these poor women going to get naked?”

“Do you think a Muslim country is going to let these women take their clothes off when it’s frowned upon to hold your own wife’s hand in public?” A man in a kandura at a distant table waved over a waiter dressed in a bastardized tuxedo jacket that looked more like a cartoonish stage prop than a restaurant uniform. Del Toro snickered and asked himself, Could this place be any more tacky, Brenda? The waiter brought over a box of red roses to the old man in the kandura, and he selected one carefully with his fingertips.

“Wait a second,” Del Toro looked on in astonishment, “What’s going on here?” He watched the old man whisper something to the waiter for a moment. Then the gentlemen approached the stage and handed one of the catatonic dancers the rose. Del Toro asked, “Is this what I think it is?”

“Well, I will answer your question with a question – have you ever seen a bunch of women look that miserable without having to strip?”

“No. Never,” although Del Toro was beer-bloated as a river log, he dove into the ice bucket for another Corona, “But, what does the rose mean?”
“It’s a transaction of some kind,” Alan grabbed a beer as well, “I don’t really know myself.” Del Toro shot him a Yeah, right side-glance, and Alan smirked and continued. “I think it means that when the dance is over, he goes around somewhere in the back, to his car or room or whatever, and they have a date for an amount those two guys just agreed on.”

“This is INSANE!”

“Hey, hey keep your voice down. We want to finish these beers before they kick us out of here, don’t we?”

“Look at this place! It’s packed!”

“This is nothing. It’s Ramadan, remember? They’re fasting and abstaining. It’s a slow night.” Del Toro could only cover his gawking mouth with his hand. Alan said, “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Let’s go in that other door and see the Indian girls.”

“Indian girls?”

“Yeah, this is the Pakistani bar. These women are all Pakistani. Over there are the Indian girls. They used to have Eastern Bloc women as well, but too many Russians were coming over here on legitimate visas and then working solo as call girls. So, the government caught on to them. Now, it’s hard for single Russian women to get visas. They have to be married. At least that’s the rumor, but must be true because you see less Russians these days.” Del Toro’s beer had barely been reduced to backwash when Alan stuffed another one in his hand, then continued, “It’s not unheard of for an American teacher or a British airline attendant or whatever to get wise to how much money she can make if she turns a few tricks with some of these high-rollers. Maybe not these guys. These guys here are dealing in peanuts, but there are billionaires here in the U.A.E. I’m sure their women-buying looks much more spectacular than this shit show.”

“Are they going to come over here and start hassling us to give a girl a rose?”
“Naw, it’s not like back home where the strippers come and give you the hard sell.”

Del Toro suddenly noticed a familiar face at a table across the room, but he can’t figure out how he could possibly recognize anyone, “Hey, let’s get out of this place.” Then, it dawned on him, “You’re not the only one who wants an autograph from me.” He subtly nodded at two gentlemen who, themselves, were shifting their positions to avoid being seen. Del Toro was amazed at how different Emirati police officers looked when they weren’t in their uniform or wearing their kanduras.

After a short, breakneck drive back to his hotel, the gluttonous aftermath of this crazy night threatened to crawl back up his throat, reminding him he should have called his wife and been in bed hours ago. He got out of the car expecting to be refreshed by the open air but turned pale green when the stifling humidity hit him. Beads of sweat sprouted from his pours, and he had to take a moment. He knew better than to bend over and put his hands on his knees, or he’d being calling his buddy Ralph for sure.

Staggering into the hotel, he was glad it was too late for anyone to be in the lobby to witness his intoxication except for the poor sots who found themselves in a similar, shipwrecked condition. The low-tempo, ambient techno in the lobby gave him the placebo effect of being home. A temporary home, but home nonetheless. Alan walked Del Toro inside, and he hoped this wasn’t the part where Alan tried to get that autographed book he offered. Instead, Alan held Del Toro back from the elevator by grabbing Del Toro’s wrist, “I guarantee they haven’t told you everything you need to know.”

“Of course, they haven’t. Why would they? I’m just giving seminars, remember?”

Alan shrugged his shoulders, “Maybe they want you to help them solve it.”

“No, cops are stingy that way. They always want to solve it themselves.”
“Ha! You hit the nail on the head with that one. I’m serious, man. It’s an actual term here. We coined it in our publication a few years ago. Say it with me, it’s called Em-i-ra-ti-za-tion.”

“Emiratization? Seriously? That’s a tongue-twister. The hell is that?”

“It’s a campaign to get Emiratis to start doing the jobs they hitherto allowed the Westerners or the Japanese or the Germans or the Russians to do. But they’re not ready to do the jobs of the Filipinos or Pakistanis yet.”

The barracho in Del Toro slipped out of his slurring mouth when he said, “They’re playing with people’s lives if they try to solve this themselves. They’re going to get people killed if they don’t handle this correctly.”

Alan placed a hand on his shoulder and mesmerized Del Toro with his eyes, “I can help you.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re going to get us both arrested before I’ve sweated through all the underwear in my suitcase?”

“Give me this weekend to show you what I’ve got.”

“You can bare me your soul, but that doesn’t mean I’m let you help me or I’m helping you.”

“Come on, man!”

“No way! Are you cuckoo in the Cocoa Puff?” Del Toro crossed his arms across his chest, “No. Never.”

“What about when the case is solved? Obviously, you’re getting an inside track!” Alan pleaded.
“The best I can do is talk to the guy who’s been supervising me and hope that he lets you be the first to make a statement to the public through your publication. *IF*, if they ever authorize a statement to the public.”

“AND if you like what I have, you own me when they figure out who the killer is.”

“I’ll be useless. They’ll deny everything…and so will I.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You know you’ll write a book, and I want in. Anyway, I’ve got my own angle, so I won’t be stealing any of your material. I’ve read all the reports over the wire. Look, I’m going to pick you up here tomorrow at…not too early…we’ve got a lot of beers to sleep off. Say ten-thirty?”

“Okay, probably won’t be there.”

“We’ll be going on a road trip.”

“Okay, you’ll be riding alone.”

“See you tomorrow morning.”

“No, you won’t.” The elevator had already closed and reopened three times without him.

“Hey, I know you’re chicken about these guys snooping on you, but they’re not going to know shit about us hanging out over the weekend. As far as they know, I’m an old friend.”

Del Toro stumbled into the elevator before it could leave him behind again, and he turned to Alan and asked, “Did you say, ‘I’m Arnold Friend,” knowing his new ‘friend’ must be a literary man who would get the allusion to the Joyce Carol Oat’s short story. Alan didn’t seem to pick it up, jut out his chin in confusion. In the last sliver of the open elevator, Del Toro saw the lightbulb blink over Alan’s head and watched a midnight smirk of his alight upon his face. As the elevator started to move, he heard Alan yell through the closed doors, “When I show you what I’ve got, you’ll owe me your first born.”
Chapter 35

(Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Fairmont Hotel)

You wake from that same dream you have all the time. The one where you run into your high school sweetheart. The one where you spend all night catching up together. You kiss her, and she smells just like you remember her. She frames your face in her hands, then tells you she can’t stay and walks away. You’ve had this nightmare for twenty years. You can’t explain why it always wakes you up and makes you feel like the day you lost your job. Nauseous. Ill. Like you felt last night after twelve beers and a plate full of shellfish.

Look at yourself. Your hotel room is in total disarray, bed unmade, room-service dishes on the table, last night’s clothes sloughed off over the arms of the settee. You’ve promised yourself you’d pull it together, but people keep throwing up detours, making you get off at the wrong exits. You pace the room, frantically getting dressed. You’re late again. You can’t let anyone see what a gamble they’ve taken with you.

You address the ghost in the room, “Oh, Brenda, what do we do?” say to yourself, “Oh, what should we do now?” You say this to the woman you used to love so much when she was girl that you hate her for it now. Because she’ll always be a girl to you. A girl who has somehow morphed into your sidekick. The Robin to your Batman, your subconscious, the looming feminine id to your shattered ego, an abusive muse, a whispering phantom, an ethereal auditory hallucination.

“Fuck! Doesn’t he know he’s an automatic suspect? Doesn’t he know who Johann Unterweger is? He’s got to know who Johann Unterweger is; he’s a journalist for crying out loud.” You put on your Roger Dubuis wristwatch with care, the only extravagance you’ve allowed yourself once you started selling books. You grab your wallet. You search for your sidearm for a
second before you remember you’re not an agent anymore, haven’t reached for a gun in long time. Now, they’ve got you pretending to be one and already you’re back in the habit.

“I can’t believe I don’t have a sidearm! Fuck a duck, should I tell her, Brenda? I should tell her. I got to tell her.” You’re tossing the room upside down looking for anything that’ll do, “I need a weapon. I need something!” You find your belt, fold it together and snap the leather, inspect it as a weapon. Then, you wrap it around your fist. It feels awkward and ridiculous, so you give up and slide it through your beltloops, like a normal person. Then you remember the room-service breakfast and go over and test the heft and hold of the flatware, the fork, the butter knife. The spoon? “Maybe I can convince him to open wide and tongue-depress him to death. Shit, I should have ordered steak-and-eggs, then I’d at least have something sharp and serrated.”

Your cellphone sounds off. It’s the personalized ringtone for your wife. You gave her your phone and told her to put “Hello,” and she put Adele’s song instead of Todd Rundgren’s, she’s that young. You know that neither song is appropriate to announce a call from your wife except for the fact that it says “Hello.” But your wife doesn’t seem to know that anyway, so you’ve never taken the time to change it. Before you answer the phone, you stare at it and say, “Shh, shh, quite, quite, be calm, it’s my wife.” You snap your fingers and presto, you’ve put yourself together and answer the phone, “Bre-MANDA, hi,” you catch yourself; you’re an idiot, you’re a goddamn idiot, try to recover, “What?...I wasn’t going to call you by her name…” Make her think she’s crazy, “I haven’t accidentally call you by her name in years, since we first started dating. You’re hearing things. I had breakfast in my mouth; I was chewing for fuck’s sake.” Now, you’ve got to kill her with kindness, “Ah, Amanda, sweetheart, don’t be so upset. Listen, baby, I have a really important day today; I have to go. I’m actually going to talk to Larissa, ah, Director Larissa Harrison…Yes, that bitch, as you say, is helping me with the case…Yes, I know it’s the least she
can do. Hey, also, I’m talking to the guy supervising me here to see if they can bring you two over. Wouldn’t that be great? If I keep pestering them about it, there’s a chance they’ll approve it. Got to go, sweetie.” You hang up and throw the phone into the heap of blankets on the floor where you kicked them off in your sleep, dripping nightmare sweat.

“Fuck, fuck, fuckity-fucking fuck! Okay, okay, I’ll tell her. I’ll tell her about Alan.” You hit speed dial for your ex-boss, and it’s ringing. You hope no one answers, but it’s still a weekday there, Friday morning. Of course, her secretary, Ms. Roebuck answers on the first ring, “Hello, Mr. Roebuck, Larissa…I’m sorry, Director Harrison, please.” The line is transferred over, “Director Harrison, hello, Del Toro here, I have a big favor to ask you. Can you run a background check…Come on, you said you’d be willing to help…I need it as soon as possible, so I called hoping you could put a little weight behind it…Okay, great…He’s a journalist…His name is Alan, Alan, hold on a second,” you try to unscramble your clutter, looking for a newspaper article of his you tracked down. You finally find it, “That’s Alan, A-L-A-N, Barret…no that’s Bravo-Echo-Romeo-Romeo-Echo-Tango. No, no, he’s not a suspect.” You didn’t tell her, “I’m vetting him as a confidential informant for the Police Department here.” You promised you’d tell her, “He’s a journalist, and he could help out if we decide to coax the UNSUB through the media…Just wanted to check him out, that’s all. No, no, I’m not worried about him at all…Just making sure we’re getting what we pay for out of him…Great. I’ll be expecting your call.” You hang up the phone, or rather she hungs up on you. You continue to get dressed with a new calm, telling yourself you told her, sort of, “I told her, I told her…told her enough. I can handle it; I can handle it myself, Brenda. Like a fool, you check the weather hoping it will be overcast or something, anything but sun. You pull apart the curtain, and the light blazes through the window as a white-hot force.
Chapter 36

Sarcastic comments on the murder exist on the internet disguised at travel blogs, when can be read on Appendix 4.
Chapter 37

(United Arab Emirates – Road trip starting point, The Fairmont Bab al Bahr Hotel)

“Ha! I knew you would come!” Alan Barret takes a moment to look Del Toro over, then surreptitiously scans the lobby around them, “But, what are you wearing? You’re going to be hot in that.”

“Are we going to the beach?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what’s with the sunhats?”

“It’s for your own good,” Alan hands him a hat and takes Del Toro by the arm, leads him away from the main lift to another service elevator, pad-lined and intended for moving furniture from floor to floor without scratching the interior, “Put it on.”

“In here?” Del Toro, dons the hat, and as the brim flops in front of his face, he picks up what’s going on. The elevator empties out to a darkened hallway facing an industrial, steel grey door. This in turn leads down a sticky, concrete hallway, obviously used for removing trash containers out of the building away from the view of the guests. Once outside, the sun momentarily blinds them. “Is all this necessary?”

“Who’s to say? Shouldn’t take any chances. Just follow me,” Alan continues past the pool, near the bar where he grabs two colorful cocktails condensing on an unoccupied table, hands one to Del Toro.

“Are those ours?” Del Too asks.

“They are now.” Del Toro pulls the rim of his sunhat down a little further. Not far down the landscaped path is another hotel. Although they both seemed to have blended into one without him noticing, this hotel, the Shangri-La, mimics the ancient sod and sandstone architecture of this region’s Arabic past. Soon, they arrive at a small motorized boat with a canopy and driver floating
in a man-made canal. Just in time for departure, they are joined at the last minute by a young British couple with two children who are too busy wrangling with their designer shopping bags to notice them. The ride is short, a matter of minutes. They disembark and stand around nonchalantly until they’re satisfied they’re not being followed.

Inside the Shangri-La are corridors and staircases of confusion, high-priced shops selling extravagant souvenirs lay virtually empty; only the shopkeepers seem to be around at this time of day. Alan turns the knob of a camouflaged door Del Toro didn’t even notice, and suddenly they’re in a parking garage, mere steps from the Jeep Cherokee he recognizes from last night’s adventure.
Chapter 38

(Any hotel, U.A.E. some time ago)

Transform – no one can see you – they see only what you want them to see – an old lady – stay hunched – let the black, billowing abya do its job – it is meant to hide you – it is meant to keep prying eyes from noticing the womanly form – you can go anywhere – they will hold the door open for you – you have your burqa on – it is a brass moustache – it is a one-way window – you can look out – they never look in – you can wander the entire building – any building – they think you know where you’re going – they think you’re lost – they offer you help – you shoo them away – like children – they feel ashamed for assuming you need them – you can follow people into elevators – you have no key – you don’t need one – they send you where you need to go – you can see everyone – watch everyone – it is so busy – maybe you’ll be back – maybe you’ll take one here – to show you can – you can – you can take anyone – anywhere – anytime
Chapter 39

Sarcastic comments on the murder exist on the internet disguised at travel blogs, when can be read on Appendix 5.
Chapter 40

(Road trip destination – Jebel Hafeet, Al Ain, U.A.E.)

Alan explains that the other side of the mountain contains civilization; there’s a scenic drive that twists and turns up the ascent, a park for picnickers, and a resort near the top. Right now, they’re on the other side. The wild side, where gaff trees and camels wander the rocky terrain on the lee of the escarpment. Without a proper vehicle, one could easily pop a tire on the sharp stones as there is really no road except for a mishmash of tire-treads from previous explorers. Near some prehistoric ruins called the Beehive Tombs, Alan parks the Cherokee and gets out, donning his hat once again; this time to keep out the sun. He tosses the folder Alan was going to leave in the vehicle back into his arms.

Seemingly unimpressed by the Neolithic stone structure that has captured Del Toro’s attention, Alan begins an ascent up the mountain. Del Toro has no choice, but to follow. Out of breath, Alan stops, stands akimbo, and looks up at the cliff in front of him, “They ruled this one an accidental fall.”

Flipping through the folder in his sweaty hands, Del Toro finds the notes on the Filipino woman, “Yup, says here, ‘Death by misadventure’.”

“Her name was Annilyn”

“De la Cruz.”

“Yeah, that’s her. Problem is, she was a laborer, working at one of the all-girl, government schools. Doesn’t seem like the hiking type.”

“No, not the typical hiking gear either. Looks like she’s wearing a dress. And are those, espadrilles? Where’d you get these pictures anyway?”
“Here, there. Sometimes we can get a reporter out here before the police arrive; sometimes someone snaps a shot on their cellphone. Sometimes we even get the crime scene photos leaked to us.”

“By police officers?”

“Not necessarily. A lot of times those photographs go through multiple hands, could be the lackey that gets handed the job of entering them into a database or whatever.”

“And who hikes alone?”

“Exactly. We interviewed her co-workers, and they said she was always desperate for more work, more money. Had three kids at home she was supporting, only saw them every two years. Taking a hike wasn’t in her schedule. Her friends said she might not pass up a quick payday if it was presented to her, if you know what I mean.”

Del Toro focuses on the body’s placement in the picture, arranges it with the actual location, and stares at the blackish stain on the rocks, “I can’t believe it’s still here.”

“It hasn’t rained in a year, you know. And what would the police have washed it with? And why? No one ever really comes to this side of the mountain, except to maybe gawk at those,” Alan points at the ancient, round tombs, “But most people don’t ever hike up this high, I’m sure.”

“So, what makes you think it’s connected? It’s…” Del Toro catches himself before revealing anything he shouldn’t.

“Well, in a place where hardly any murders take place in a single year, and those that do are easily solvable as disputes between enemies, between friends, lovers, it sure sticks out to me that we’ve had a bunch of unclaimed dead girls pop up all over the place. Got to be connected. Even if he’s not killing them in the same way, maybe he’s just learning, just warming up, trying new things out. All the cases I’m going to show you today are his mistakes. In fact, we interviewed
some people who were here the night they believe this accident occurred. He probably saw their headlights and got scared off.” Del Toro nods in agreement before noticing he’s even doing it. Lost in thought, he crosses his arms and starts gnawing away at a little piece of skin on his thumb cuticle, mumbling, “I don’t know Brenda, what do you think?” Alan hears this and whips around towards Del Toro, who quickly shuts up before he has to explain that, too.
Chapter 41

(Jebel Hafeet – 23 months before)

Let her vomit out her words – you owe her that comfort – you must keep her from flying – she is so close to seeing your real face – you see her eyebrows knit – her teeth grit in anger – you can’t hear what she says – the roar is too loud – the wind through the canyon – the beast through your veins – you smile – the prize is too powerful – she must follow you – up another step – you promise its close – so close – a few more steps – you promise going down is effortless – so easy – her face stops snarling – she wants what you promised – this feels like play to you – this is what it feels like to flirt – you laugh – she doesn’t laugh anymore – you’re losing her – she’s going down without you – you chase her – she’s not as nimble as you – you catch her – turn her around to face you – she is making you beg her – you said you would never do it – you’re doing it – you’re doing it – it’s her fault for coming – you dangled a reward – that’s all she thought about – she has to reciprocate – you hold her – all your thoughts wrap into her softness – she twists away – you cannot see her eyes – you make her face you – she won’t open the eyes – you only want the eyes – only the eyes – have to get the pearls – crack the shell – you lift the burden above you – you let it fall – crack her shell – Now to take the pearls – you see eyes in the distance – you ask how the eyes are floating in the darkness – you ask how it has grown so dark – so suddenly – you let time blow away – too dark to see now – the eyes are coming closer – two bright yellow eyes approaching – you must wake up – stand and run – the eyes are looking at you – you’re in their sight – shining their judgement on you – the eyes are getting bigger – bigger – wake up and run – you cannot finish – you can cry later – run – run.
Chapter 42

Sarcastic comments on the murder exist on the internet disguised at travel blogs, when can be read on Appendix 6.
Chapter 43

(Road Trip destination – Deira, Dubai, U.A.E.)

After the trek up a mountain in the midday sun, Del Toro is overwhelmed by Alan’s stamina and falls asleep in the car before they’ve reached the city limits of Al Ain. When he wakes up, they’re driving through the umbra of buildings lining the massive highway like a space-age version of the canyons they just left. It doesn’t take long for Del Toro to notice the change in architecture; the buildings in this part of the city are beige and dull, stuck in the 1970’s instead of the gleaming, reflective surfaces of the downtown skyscrapers along Sheikh Zayed Drive.

When they pull into a parking spot outside of a dated, yet well-heeled hotel, Alan takes off speed-walking without paying. Del Toro points out, “We’re parked right next to a meter.”

“It’s the weekend,” Alan bellows without turning around. He suddenly cuts into an alley and out of sight just ahead. When Del Toro trots up to Alan, he understands why Alan was moving so fast; it’s already several degrees cooler in the alley’s shade. On the other end of the passageway, the urban jungle they step into looks busier, less touristy, bustling with people going about their day. By this point, it is late in the afternoon, so more people are starting to come out, shops are opening up after their midday closures. Shopkeepers are waking from their naps. Del Toro assumes that everyone around them is a poor immigrant of some kind, African, Asian, Middle Eastern. None of them are Caucasian like them. They stand out; unlike the smoky brothel from the night before, everyone notices them and stares shamelessly. They cross the busy street into another alley.

“This woman was Alyona Buylko. Russian girl. If you check the report, it says she died of an overdose, right here in the alley.”

 Alan double-checks the report, “Says here Ukrainian.”

“Ukrainian, Russian. Same thing.”
“Don’t let them hear you say that.”

“The paper tried to request the toxicology report.”

“And?”

“Wouldn’t budge, so who knows for sure if she had any drugs in her system at all to justify that finding, but she was dressed to the nines. And witnesses say she didn’t have any signs she was a users. Look at the picture. See, she was sleeveless, and she doesn’t have any track marks or anything.”

“Well, those junkies know how to hide it, under the fingernails, in the toes, in the thigh, wherever.”

“Plus, it’s really hard to find that shit in the U.A.E. I mean, it does exist, and she’s in the line of work where it’d be easier for her to find it, but drugs are certainly not common.”

“She was an escort?” Del Toro asks, making his way back in the direction from which they had come when the alley starts to fill with curious gentlemen smoking cigarettes and eyeballing them, mere steps away.

“Yeah, it was tough, but we eventually found a few of her friends who were willing to talk. They said she never took drugs. Has a five-year-old back in Russia…”

“Ukraine.”

“Yeah, yeah, fucking Ukraine, whatever, point is the coroner wouldn’t give us a statement at all.”

“I’ve met the coroner. Seems a decent guy. I’ll talk to him.”

Alan stops dead in his tracks, “Look, man, you’ve got to watch who you talk to. He may be a part of all this.” Del Toro nods in agreement.
“The most telling is the location. Look at this place. It would be hard to blend in here as a Westerner or an Emirati. I haven’t seen a ghostface like me or a kandura for miles around here…except for us, so they’re not the usual Johns around here.”

“She could’ve been dumped. The UNSUB dropped her off in the alley and skedaddled.”
Chapter 44

(Deira, Dubai, U.A.E. – 15 months)

You’ve found yourself here again – all tethered and tangled – you’re panting and drooling – you’ve gotten past the difficulty – you’ve done it too soon – your vision is ruined – you must adapt – you had to spring the trap – she was going to get out of the alley – she is the one you wanted – her eyes are planets – her eyes are open wide - you’re on top – her planets loom large – they are rotating around – revolving to the dark side away from the light – you can see her God in them – don’t close them – don’t close them – your eyes are open wide – you can see your eyes in hers - why here – why did you unleash it here – you’re in the open – the world is going on around you – they can see you if they just use their eyes – they can see everything you’re doing – your hand needs to cup that terror inside of her – you cannot let it escape – the whole world will come – stay on top of her – she cannot move = you need to use both hands – you’re losing control – someone is standing in the window – someone is trying to look down on you – they will see what you are doing – put all your burden on her – you’re in the shadow – don’t move – let your burden sink into her suppleness – her gasp will seep away and not return – it only takes compression – one breath – another breath – it’s gone – why can’t you do it now – do it now – you shouldn’t have done it here – someone put eyes on you – you ruined another one – leave her – escape – you will have another day – they’re coming for you – place her in the dark – further in the dark – walk away this time – don’t run – don’t run – they won’t find her – you will get another chance – another chance – the eyes will never be the same – never be the same constellation – those planets are lost forever
Chapter 45

(United Arab Emirates – Travel Blog, entry 4)

The last stop of our excursion is meant to put you at ease after a long day of sightseeing; anyone’s muscles would be sore, footpads pulsating, neck cricked. So, why not indulge in the many massage parlors that populate the neighborhoods of Dubai? Any kind of relaxation can be had from ice-immersion baths and cryogenic chambers for the sports enthusiasts to hot-stone and cupping therapy to loosen tension and induce blood flow. Not to mention that everything from Swedish, Thai, or Shiatsu sessions can be found on any street, especially in the tourist areas, like the Dubai Marina, Downtown Dubai near the tallest building in the world, or back in old town Deira. But what bodywork would be complete without the famed “Happy Ending”? Not sure how to go about distinguishing one parlor’s forte from another? That’s quite alright, because the tireless toadies of these establishments have already done the work for you by discreetly placing colorful, not-to-be-missed calling cards all over your windshield, door jamb, or even strewn about the sidewalks you walk every day, like pink rose petals to follow towards your fantasy. Certainly, the more judicious eye would question the moral implications of such businesses intermingled among the nearby family attractions, but who’s to say the neon-signed entrances don’t offer legitimate relief?

Therefore, it is to be expected that a woman working in such a sensitive industry as human-to-human, flesh-to-flesh contact might fall afoul to a dissatisfied customer. Through no fault of any man put out by the clumsy hands of his masseuse for that evening, we could deduce that peeved patrons might express their frustrations anonymously. As it is highly illegal in such a lawful place as the U.A.E. to physically assault someone, it stands to reason that if an altercation should result in an untimely demise, no witnesses will be around to corroborate the complainant’s disappointment for unfulfilled transactions.
Such was the rare case with Subira Habesha, a beautiful, slender runway model of the lower echelon. As is common with many transplants from impoverished countries, she was subsidizing her dreams with humbler employment. Perhaps on the weekends she was using her good-looks and nimble, athletic body, not on the catwalk, but at the cathouse. At least, that’s what the authorities assumed it was when they arrived at the gutted business. Everything had been whisked away. Gone were the welcoming attendees at the counter; in fact, the bamboo counter itself was gone. Absent were the mattresses and fold-up masseuse tables. All that remained of the once garish parlor was the shapely nude body of the Ethiopian woman, a single stab wound just above her sculpted abs. An unfortunate hazard of the trade, she would never fulfill her dreams of making the cover of a magazine. Rather, she ended up a tiny blurb in the back page of a news rag.
On the outskirts of the Dubai Marina, where the yachts and nightlights can no longer be seen, are residential buildings of the lowlier class – retail workers, mid-salary everymen, clerks, attendees, hourly-wagers. Alan explains this as they enter a concrete slab of a building that looks half-finished or past its shelf life. He can’t tell which. They take a decrepit elevator that makes them both flinch as it drops several times in its ascent towards the fourth floor. Even before the elevator doors open, they can hear sounds of children playing and Indians television programs blasting through the apartment walls. From there they take the stairs up one more floor. The entire floor is a shell, a ghost town of apartments, every door open, or off its hinges, or missing completely.

Alan takes the folder from Del Toro, saying, “This was the only black victim. Her ethnicity might seem out of place, but, like the others, she was beautiful. Ethiopian. She has a name as long as hell, looks like Alphabet Soup, but she went by Sabira Habesha.” Then Alan hands the folder back to Del Toro, “By the time we got word of the incident, before the police even got here, this place was gutted.”

“Gutted?”

“Guts out, like a fish. We finally got some residents from other floors to talk, said this whole floor was a brothel. Every room was divided by sheets hung from the roof. Five or six beds to a room. Down where we came in, they used to have a security guard set up. He’d let guys up according to capacity to take their turns.” Alan starts to walk down the hallways that are quickly growing gloomy. The sun outside is setting, and Alan points out, “The girls used to live over here on this end of the floor…when they weren’t working. Once the police got here, the whole brothel scattered rather than answer any questions.”
“Just left her here, dead, huh? A thousand miles from her closest relative, I bet,” Del Toro shakes his head, “What’d they rule this one?”

“You’ll never believe it…Suicide.”

“Suicide? Are you fucking kidding me? Suicide? By stabbing? What? Did they think she committed harakiri?”

“I guess they think she pulled an Elliot Smith.”

“Who?”

“Elliot Smith, sang the Good Will Hunting soundtrack, you know? Ah, never mind. That’s what it says, suicide.”

“What about those marks on her wrist that look like ligature marks?”

Alan peaks inside the folder again, “Ha! Says here, hesitation marks.”

“You’re shitting me? Let me see that folder,” Del Toro snatches the folder from Alan, “So, all of these took place a while ago, dating almost two years back, with intervals of five, six, seven months in between.”

“And they didn’t tell you about these deaths, did they?” Alan waits for an answer, “Well, did they?”

“I’m not convinced these are connected.”

“Oh, so now you’re going to go along with this, too?

“I’m just being…open-minded. I’m sure there are circumstances you’re not privy to.”

“Now you’re shitting me.”

“Let’s get out of here before we’re trapped in the dark.”
Chapter 47

(Dubai Marina, Dubai, U.A.E. – seven months ago)

You knew this was a mistake – you came here anyway – this is beneath you – came here anyway – you’re angry at yourself – she doesn’t know that – you try to explain – she thinks she’s better than you – you tell her who she really is – you tell her where she belongs – she laughs at you – you really liked her eyes – crème swirled in coffee – the color of fossilized sap – striations of a lion’s mane – fire under glass – now she narrows them at you – you cannot see her eyes as well – she wants you out – she starts yelling – she asked for it now – now you have to show her who you are – how does she have these eyes – how does she deserve such beautiful eyes – eyes that can open any door – you tell her what she deserves – you let her do this to you – you’re supposed to do this to her – how do you always forget who you are – always show them who you are – show who you’re supposed to be – who you are trying to be – you show them the truth – they show it back – it hurts you both – you wanted to love her – to hate her – to love them all – to hate them all – you’re supposed to be inside – others put their love inside – why can’t you – you have to put something else inside – something as sharp as hate – that’s what they deserve – if you can’t have love – they can’t have love – put it in her – put it in like you would put in your love – if you put it in just right – she cannot tell you who you are anymore – she cannot make any sound – put it in and the air leaks out of her – she gives you the eyes – eyes as round as gumballs – as candy – as sweet things – you want to suck them out – you’ve done it again – you’ve put yourself in a place where you cannot work – someone is coming now – just do what you want – finish what you started for once – try – try at least – you coward – how can you ever forgive yourself – you drained her – that’s not enough – you came for her sight – for all she has seen and will see.
Chapter 48
(Sorso Sports Bar – Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

After a tedious road trip, Del Toro discovered the impressive hotel he was staying at used the term “five-star” liberally, as made apparent by the actual “five-star” hotel Alan introduced him to across the canal. It wasn’t easy, but if he squinted and counted correctly, he could make out the window of his empty room over at the Fairmont Hotel with its curtains open and the lights still on. He had to hand it to room service: it was pretty hospitable of them not to turn them off. There’s nothing lonelier than an unlit room.

“Nope, nope, definitely, four stars,” Del Toro shook his head.

“What’s that? Don’t like the digs?”

“Who wouldn’t?” Del Toro said, taking a seat in a burgundy leather booth, “I was just noting that my hotel must be four stars because this place is definitely five. I don’t even think I can afford to eat here.”

“Your per diem covers three meals a day. doesn’t it? And we’ve only eaten once, except for some peanuts we got at the ADNOC,” Alan managed to say, but the accumulation of the day and the one drink they had finished washed over him vindictively like a quick narcotic. The bags beneath his eyes spoiled to a bruised fruit color, the moxie in his face threatening impatience; Del Toro was sure he looked equally cranky. In the three-city circuit they made, they had essential driven halfway across Texas. Both of them began to nod-off in their beers, oblivious to the crowd of beautiful night owls gathering at the outside bar for Ladies’ Night.” Two drinks for one…Ladies only…as advertised in pink chalk on the black board at the entrance.

Del Toro flinched back to life when Alan asked ambiguously, “Why do they do it, Ramon?”
For a second, Del Toro thought Alan was wondering how the gaggle of women who tittered by could wear heels that high before he understood what Alan was talking about and answered, “They can’t hold back. Can’t resist.”

“Sounds like an excuse, like you’re saying they have no control over themselves.”

“You’re right; it’s not that. It’s that they won’t be denied. Wouldn’t dare be denied.”

“So, they’re like spoiled brats?”

“If you knew what most of these guys have lived through, you’d feel sorry for them,” Del Toro couldn’t believe it, but he found himself signaling the waiter for another beer, “But you’d only have sympathy for a split second. They’re not like you and me; they’re the raw nerve-endings of humanity. We have protection from ourselves, an enamel coating us from our impulses, but they don’t. They walk around like, like, I don’t know, pulsing toothaches, demanding to be felt, to be dealt with.”

“How do you deal with these sick pieces-of-shit?” Alan said with a sneer Del Toro hadn’t encountered before.

“I’m sure you’ve done it yourself.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ve interviewed plenty of people you found repulsive,” Alan scoffed, but Del Toro continued, “I was good at my job because I did have sympathy for them. I knew what they were going through because I felt it, too. We all do.”

Alan’s head slumped in apparent fatigue and slurred, “We all feel like killing pretty women.”

“What’s that?”

“I asked, we ALL feel like killing pretty women?”
“Yeah, we do. When we walk down the street, we assault them in our minds. We rip their clothes off and imagine them as ours. We’d take them, have our way with them…if the circumstances were just right…juuuuuust right, we wish we could.”

“I envy them that. Do you know what I mean?”

“The fucked-up thing is that I do know what you mean. Know exactly what you mean.”

When the waiter brought a new round, Alan seemed rejuvenated, “Think about it, they do what they want, when they want, to whomever they want. It’s depraved, obviously, but it takes guts, takes balls to do that!” Alan said, staring into Del Toro eyes until he felt uncomfortable, “You know what I’m saying though, right?”

Del Toro couldn’t stand his unpleasant face anymore, “If you only knew. Sometimes I feel like I’m just one gradation away from these guys. I got demons of my own clawing to get out.”

“You don’t say?”

“Yeah, why do you think I couldn’t do it anymore?” Del Toro asked.

“Do what?”

Del Toro unexpectedly shot up out of his seat, and the few diners sitting next to them spun around and gawked at Del Toro as he executed a crisp military salute to his forehead, “YES, SIR, SIR, SPECIAL AGENT DEL TORO, REPORTING TO DUTY, SIR!”

Alan laughed uncertainly and addressed the table next to him, “This guy’s a barrel of laughs when he gets a few in him. Don’t mind us,” then turning back to Del Toro he said, “My man, take it down a peg or two. You don’t have a drinking license, and if you start flipping out, they’ll ask for one.”

Del Toro slumped back into his seat, “Except in my case, it was Yes, ma’am, Ma’am!”
“Ramon, Ramon, take it easy, we all got our demons to exorcise, but…” Alan clinched a cheers with Del Toro’s beer, then waved him in close, conspiratorially, “…you wouldn’t stray so far from the straight-and-narrow as to do something like, you know, “hunkering down even further, “actually stabbing someone to death, would you?”

“NO! Naw! That takes a really broken compass.”

“Sheew, you were scaring me there. I’m glad with a little nudge, your moral compass still points due north,” Alan reached in to cheers again, but Del Toro’s phone rang.

Del Toro stood up as frantically for this interruption as he had a moment ago, making heads turn again, “Excuse me. I’ve been expecting this call all day.” He stepped away for some privacy. The music was thumping a dull bass outside, so he altered his course from the buffet table and strode to the lowkey bar inside. “So, Director Harrison, what did you find out?”

“He’s clean as far as we can tell.”

“I kind of thought so, but what does that me, as far as we can tell?” Del Toro checked for Alan over his shoulder and witnessed him at their table looking glum and impatient. When Del Toro turned back around, two game admirers were sipping their red pin-straws in his direction. Goodness, he became distracted, how do these ladies end up here? The one with Cleopatra banks stepped in from of her blonde friend to move closer to Del Toro at the bar.

Director Harrison voice snapped him out of his diversion, “It means that your guy does have a juvenile record, but it’s sealed. We’d have to get a warrant to take a look. Will that be necessary?”

“No, no, I’m…I’m wearing myself out beating the wrong bush. Just…just drop it. I spent some time with him, and my Spidey-sense tingled a little because it wasn’t really tingling at all, if you know what I mean.”
“If it will make you feel better, I’ll write up a warrant and send it by slow pony if it’s not that urgent. When it gets here, it gets here, and we’ll take a look.”

“Yeah, sure. Why not? Cover all bases.”

“Cover both our asses.”

“Good day, then, ma’am,” Del Toro said, thankful that he could still talk her about business despite their relationship and grateful she was going along with this whole fake-agent game he was playing. Del Toro ambled back to the table, and he couldn’t resist, sneaking a backward glance.

When Del Toro rejoined him, Alan asked, “Everything alright back home?”

“They are now, my friend. They are now,” he said without taking his eyes off the two women at the bar who were encroaching, faux-coquettishly towards their table.

With an Australian accent he could barely decipher, Cleopatra said, “We were wondering if you two blokes would like to come dance with us.” She offered Del Toro her hand, and he put on his best stuttering and stammering act until he finally let himself be led outside to the dance floor. Behind him, he caught the dawning look of dread shutter through Alan. It looked as though Alan was about to get up and give chase before Cleopatra’s blonde friend pulled him by the arm in the opposite direction. She was beaming and bopping to the music while Alan craned his neck toward Del Toro as if he were a boy being dragged away from the playground by his mother. On the dancefloor, the beautiful stranger pulled Del Toro to her bosom for a slow dance to a song that wasn’t slow. He knew this could only lead to a war-chest of regret, but he felt so momentarily uninhibited and unsupervised. He kept a straight face so as not to lead this young lady into thinking he was something other than a space-filler, a stand-in, a mere dance partner that she could use instead of swaying alone to the music while others enjoyed themselves. That was, after all, what he took her to be at that moment, and he wanted the feelings to be mutual. He was there, occupying
time and space, why not indulge in the twirl and exhaled breath of the moment, engage in the heat of atmosphere around him?

Looking over his lovely partner’s shoulder, Del Toro couldn’t tell if Alan looked so aggravated because he was dancing with the cuter of the two, or if the woman he was with was being a total drag. Perhaps it was something else, but it was the most miserable Alan had looked in the entire time they spent together. Before he knew what was going on, the modern-day Pharaoh-princess pulled Del Toro further away towards the distant bar on the other side of the pool, and although he felt rude for leaving his new friend behind looking so uncomfortable, he could only afford a quick wave before he was dragged through the dancing crowd. But it almost looked like the pretty blonde was getting frustrated and ready to walk away, and Del Toro couldn’t calculate how anyone could screw up an encounter with a lady so far out of his league trying that hard for a good time. She must be really desperate, and she must be into hatchet faces, Del Toro thought, totally perplexed about what some women see in men and totally dumbfounded about how some men could screw up such a sure thing. Guess it was something they were missing. Or maybe something he was missing?
Chapter 49

(Capital Gate Building - Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

I gathered members of the taskforce, which was finally granted official status and allowed twenty-four men of my choosing whose sole duty would be to investigate the recent string of murders without any other distractions. All of them have been sworn to absolute secrecy and threatened with serious consequences if confidentiality was breached. By default, I referred to our operation as the Desert Burial Taskforce for the time being. I could tell by their hesitation that the officers didn’t like the idea of transferring the boxes of evidence and scanning every individual item by hand like Del Toro requested for his seminar. The troops started to pass the job on to the janitors and office boys, but I explained to them, as Del Toro had to me, that we couldn’t have outside eyes peaking in on the data. For one, I explained to the troops, the information was too graphic and sensitive for the average civilian to accidentally come across. Could you imagine one of these guys from the rice-paddies of Bangladesh dropping a box of crime scene photos? He would probably run home screaming. Also, each piece of evidence was so grotesque, it might tempt one of them to snatch it and sell it to the press. And the press certainly didn’t seem to have any sympathy for the victims they exposed to the world. No doubt the news media would churn out any leaked information they could get their hands on, piecemeal at a time, to the equally ghoulish public. As long as the violence wasn’t happening to them personally, they’d suck up the bleeding pages with a straw. If the public was affected personally, then they’d want to be informed. So, now reporters from all over the world were starting to bore into us like maggots. Our new spokesperson was finding it harder and harder every day to dodge problematic questions, but I picked a good person for the job – the only woman on our taskforce. I figured she would be a softer, gentler face for any public announcements, and Del Toro said a female spokesperson’s physical presence would be enticing for the killer while her position of authority would be
offensive and threatening, which might tempt him to make contact. Del Toro theorized the UNSIB was hoarding every clip of news intensely. As much as our new spokesperson was being hounded by the press, our taskforce hadn’t been granted permission to make any real comments other than it’s an ongoing investigation.

I noticed Del Toro looked tense and stressed as he scurried around the lecture hall, but he also told me he was impressed with the arrangement. Still, he asked why he wasn’t presenting at the Fairmont Conference room where he had previously been set up. I told him we chose the Capital Gate Convention Center because it came equipped with translator headphones in some of the rooms, and it was close to his hotel.

I also thought Del Toro looked tired and sullen. Even though he said he had spent much of the weekend by the pool, compiling the data for his seminar, I knew this wasn’t true. He had him tailed for a bit, but our guy did a terrible job and lost him. Del Toro says he misses his family, but I think he’s suffering from a hangover and dehydration from too much Latin dancing. I also noticed that he was rather frustrated that we hadn’t gone ahead with taskforce duties over the weekend, but after the way he went after Officer Mansour Abdullah and his family in that interview, the administration was having second thoughts about bringing him into the investigation. I wouldn’t disclose that to Del Toro…yet. But I might have to if things didn’t improve. I’d have to see how his seminar went today. The administration talked about having him followed and overseen, twenty-four hours a day, but I changed their minds for now. However, I couldn’t get Officer Mansour Abdullah to let it go, so I’m worried he may harass Del Toro, if he hasn’t already.

Nevertheless, from what I could see, Del Toro was what every good lecturer should be, making sure every item for his slideshow was close at hand. All the pictures were clearly
presented, and the detailed aerial maps were easy to understand. He had pinpointed the killer’s estimated stalking range and displayed a gallery of photos and physical evidence, much like the one he used to rattle poor Mansour Abdullah during his interrogation. And we made sure we secured an excellent translator from New York University Abu Dhabi, who, of course, was sworn to secrecy on threat of prison and deportation for breaking secrecy.

I got near Del Toro and could smell an entire pot of coffee he was using to cover something else, so I thought perhaps he was hungover and jittery along with general stage fright. He was about to get in front of a bunch of foreign police officers who, honestly, hadn’t been sold completely on what the role of a criminal profiler was supposed to do for us. It seemed like nonsense or magic to most of them, and they would really lose their minds if they knew the true circumstances behind why he’d been forced to resign from the Bureau. As for now, the overall feeling was to trust him and go along with his lead because I instructed them to.

I let Del Toro go about his business, finishing up, while I secured things out front and went to get a snack from a vending machine. Then I returned, Del Toro had apparently invited all the officers inside who had been talking somberly in the hallway trying to look serious, and he started the seminar without me. I sat down and took a seat near the back without a pair of headphones. There were an equal number of us dressed in kanduras and police uniforms in the room, depending on our rank, aqua green regalia with burgundy berets for Abu Dhabi officers and beige with blue berets for the Dubai officers. Our one female member was dressed in the long, grey skirt assigned to female officers, but even though she had made a few statements to the press, she hadn’t been formally introduced to everyone yet.

Officer Mansour Abdullah was the last to enter and sat in the back on the opposite end of the room. He was dressed in a kandura, like me, and I was going to keep an eye on him and hoped
he’d give Del Toro a fair chance to show us what he knows. I personally didn’t want Mansour Abdullah on the taskforce and Del Toro was adamant about not including him, but the higher-ups insisted just as vehemently that he should be there to seek justice for his slain relative.

Del Toro was asked to keep the lecture as simplistic as possible, using layman’s terms instead of academic language. I also suggested for him to speak slowly for the translator who was listening then translating into Arabic in an adjoining booth with a sophisticated sound system. I thought the translator probably had the most difficult job. As insecure as we all were with our English ability, nobody envied him that position. I could see that Del Toro was struggling to speak as slowly and clearly as humanly possible without coming off like he was talking to a bunch of children.

By the time I came in slightly late, Del Toro was at the podium saying, “We will be referring to the unknown suspect as the UNSUB for the sake of simplicity, gentlemen.” Right after saying this, Del Toro acknowledged the one woman in the room with a bashful smile in apology and continued, “The cases we can confirm indicate that the UNSUB is a sophisticated, organized offender with some contradictory actions of a disorganized killer as well, which is not unheard of. There have been concerns from experts that trying to place an UNSUB into either of these two categories is too limiting, too black-and-white, especially since we have experienced perpetrators that engage in actions indicating both. In this case, we have some sloppy, disorganization, but for the most part, our killer is predominantly organized, calculating, thoughtful, and complicated.”

I could see that some of the officers in the room where holding the headphones tightly to their ears, perplexed with curiosity or wonderment at the accuracy of the rapid-fire Arabic piping
through the sound equipment. And like me, I could tell the officers were amazed at how the translator could voice-over the English in Arabic so quickly and effortlessly.

Del Toro continued, “Judging from the fact that you have very little crime of this magnitude in the U.A.E. and no juvenile correctional institutions, there is no indication the offender originated from this country.” The crowd grumbled in a low uniform murmur, and almost all of the attendees shook their heads in agreement and relief – and maybe even something akin to pride. Not so sure however, one Dubai officer I had only recently met, asked, “How can you be so sure?”

Del Toro replied, “These attacks likely stem from a build-up of frustrations boiling in the UNSUB. These kinds of deep-seeded aggressions form over an entire lifetime, over an accumulation of perceived slights or injustices upon him starting in his early childhood – him because almost assuredly the UNSUB is a man, for obvious reasons. So, indicators would have raised a lot of flags over the years.” The projector lit up the dim room, and Del Toro referred to the image on the screen with a laser pointer. The image was a triangular diagram titled the “MacDonald Triad,” the corner of the triangles labeled enuresis, pyromania, and cruelty to animals and children.

The attentive audience conveyed their confusion with quizzical faces, so he clarified, “Enuresis is a fancy word for pissing the bed at an inappropriate age, and pyromania you’ve probably heard before, right?”

He asked the attendees, but when no one answered, Del Toro continued, “It means setting fires or, more precisely, a love of fire. And as you can see the last one is cruelty to animals or small children. We used to label it ‘cruelty to animals’ only, but often small children are treated without sympathy or empathy by young offenders instead of animals. Anyway, a child exhibiting one of these is bad; two is already indicating a possibility of future violence, but all three? Not
good, not good at all. It shows a strong propensity of future violence. So back to our original question, this triad of behaviors would have been obvious to an observant teacher or relative.”

“And why would a boy start doing these things?” someone asked.

“Well, it’s the old combination of nature verses nurture. He was nurtured on abuse and trauma during formative milestone in his life by someone important and pivotal to him. That, combined with the nature of who he is, his chemical makeup produced the who we’re dealing with right now.” The next succession of slides were actual crime scene photos of strangled cats, bludgeoned dogs that were people’s pets as implied by the collars, other pictures of animals lamed or beheaded, skulls on pegs. They went on and on until the uninitiated taskforce members could look no more.

Del Toro pushed forward, “The problem with this theory of mine that the UNSUB is not from this country stems from the fact that in America, it is likely that an offender like this would have run into a lot of trouble. There would be a paper trail of his worrying behaviors.”

One of my colleagues raised his hand and politely rose to his feet to speak, “Can you give us an example of what you mean?”

“Sure. In most cases, we – as investigators – visit schools, hospitals, mental institutions which I know some of you have been tasked with already, and we ask the faculty if they’ve had any students in the past that were caught or snitched on for committing acts of aggression or exhibiting any of these signs of the triad. Many times people disregard these actions or justify them, and they don’t get officially reported anywhere, but there are often people who remember these things later when we ask about them,” the crowd whispers to each other, “For example, say you’ve got a kid who mercilessly picked on a smaller kid, or a kid who tortured animals, and not just any animals like birds or lizards or something like that, mind you, but large, emotive animals.
Animals that can display expressions of fear, like a dog or a cat, maybe even a sheep or a goat that can seemingly cry out in pain and terror.”

Another gentleman from the Dubai Police spoke up. His English was rough and heavily accented, “Almost every Emirati family owns a farm with camel and goat, sheep, like this, and also, sometimes, we let them, let the boys, you know, cut the goat, to learn how to do this. To make the goat ready for eating.”

“I understand, sir. You’re concerned you might not attribute the slaughtering of a lamb as being something bad, and I’m sure that for the most part, teaching your child how to butcher an animal is an acceptable social norm in most circumstances.”

Another officer joined in, “I agree with him; we do this often, but a father would notice his animals being abused…and we don’t have a history like this. Our school system here is very new, and we, maybe, don’t have the papers, the takarear, the..the reports that show these things. So, we would not know, maybe, if our kids were like this.”

While these gentlemen were voicing their concerns, Del Toro continued to flip through photos of disturbing images of hanged Barbie dolls and labeled slides pointing out that cats were symbols of femininity more so than dogs. Therefore, violent acts against cats specifically symbolized deviant childhood aggressions against the female form.

Del Toro tried to calm their rising anxiety by waving his hands down in a supplicating motion, “Yes, yes, I know. I’ve been informed of that, and that creates a real problem for us. You see, there are two things that could have happened. Either this UNSUB suffered a series of traumatic events, and the teachers and parents would have noticed these outbursts of emotion, like clothes that smell like urine from adolescent bed wetting, or a kid starting fires or even just a criminal record starting at a young age. Or, since you don’t really have a system like this…” Del
Toro picked up and wielded a manila folder from the podium as an example of records that would have been kept of an offender over his lifetime. Someone from the audience finished his sentence for him, “We wouldn’t know if the killer went unnoticed in our country.”

Another one of the collegues from my actual subdivision chimed in, “But I am sure we don’t really have people like that here.”

The crowd was getting restless, so Del Toro was forced to say, “Excuse me, someone from the audience said something. What was that?”

The officer repeated, “I said that we don’t have children like that here.”

“Whether you truly don’t have children here like that or not is beside the point. The point is that if you did have them, nobody would even know. You don’t have a system to identify them.”

The officer countered emphatically, “No, I am sure! I am certain, people like this would be found and dealt with.”

“This may be true, which brings me back to my theory in the first place,…that our UNSUB was likely, likely, formed somewhere else…in a Western country probably, and you guys just welcomed him right in.” This statement threw the room into a buzz of scoffs and whispered jeers. Until an older man in a *kandura*, a *sheikh* from the administration whom I didn’t notice had been sitting near the front the entire time, stood to speak, “Excuse me,” a little louder, “Excuse me, I have question…” everyone got quiet out of respect for their elder, “You write in your report here, that he would not be from a poor, impoverished country. Why is that, sir?”
Chapter 50

(Recent Past – Al Ain Golf, Rugby, and Equestrian Club – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

Diwata came back and told the crew standing around the cash register near the bar that she had practically kicked them in the balls, and they still weren’t getting the hint. After the lights had been dimmed, everyone else had gone except these two gentlemen – could have been American, could have been Canadian, she couldn’t tell. They sounded American, but they didn’t look like her idea of America. They were dark complexed gentlemen with thick eyebrows, not blonde and wispy-haired or blue-eyed.

The manager finally went against his policy and informed the gentlemen that the restaurant would be closing up soon, and they need to pay their bill. He didn’t like doing this because he had had many confrontations with Emiratis and Westerns alike who had become indignant and self-entitled when asked to leave before the exact closing time of midnight, because he was only Egyptian after all. In this case, Diwata watched from over her manager’s shoulder, waiting to wipe up the rest of their considerable mess. They transferred all their contempt towards him, snatching the bill out of his hand and shoving in a credit card. Then they both turned to her with a lascivious smile, and handed her something. In one practiced motion, she thanked them curtly and secreted away what they had handed her without even looking to see what it was.

Diwata’s feet were tired, and she thanked good God they had custodians to mop. She saw them come in, a tiny little Indian man and a stout old lady from Sri Lanka, dressed in their blue service uniforms that looked more ridiculous than hers. Both held grey dreadlocked mops, and the man wheeled in a bucket. How they could do it at that age, she would never understand, and she told herself that would be her one day. Then, scolding herself, she promised that would never be her.
All the golf carts to pick them up were making the rounds. One was dragging a soccer goal from the pitch, and the other one had left to pick up the crew at the Equestrian Club restaurant when they saw the rugby club restaurant wouldn’t be closing at the usual time. She decided to walk despite her worn shoes and stiff knees. It was winter and the air was cool and damp from the moisture of the sprinklers running all evening. It wasn’t a long walk, and after pitying those two old cleaners, she needed to think. She got an email from her mother saying that Diego had been crinkling up his nose and squinting at his homework; she suspected he needed glasses, like his dad. She also wrote that she needed to refill her prescription. And that her oldest, Mariam, was dying for a guitar even though she was only ten years old – even a cheap one would do – because all her friends were already learning how to play. Every boy in the Philippines wants to learn how to play the guitar, so she was proud of her daughter for wanting to stand out. Her mother always asked for things she needed by email, never by video chat. Her mother must have known she wouldn’t be able to hide the fear of where the money would come on her face.

That made her look behind her to see if the golf cart was anywhere near; it would stop and pick her up if it was. There was nothing but dark trees lining the road back to the club, so it was safe for her to reach into bra where she had tucked away all the tips the customers had given her that night. Maybe there was a thousand-dirham note in there today; that would solve all her problems that month. Yeah, right! She sputtered a laugh through her hand out loud. Almost everyone knows that tipping isn’t expected in the U.A.E., and most come from countries that don’t tip at all. American always tip when they first arrive, but after they’ve been here awhile, even they discover it’s not customary, therefore unnecessary, to leave a tip. Still some do. She wondered if all her co-workers were as cutthroat about hiding their tips as she was. It was unspoken business. She talked about it once with Prissy because they hardly ever worked together since Prissy was
usually at the Equestrian Club, sometimes the Golf Club, and she was always at the Rugby Club. They figured they wouldn’t be pissing in each other’s playground, but it would wise, if not understood, to avoid discussing hidden tips with anyone you worked with. What if co-workers didn’t get any tips that day? What if they weren’t taking any tips at all? She hated it when a customer handed her a tip in front of all the staff or left it out in the open while she bussed a table. She wanted to scream *You idiot! Don’t you know I have to put it in the tip box now!*

Even in the dim light of the street lamps, she could see that none of the bills were the bluish tint of a thousand-dirham bill. But there were a few clumps of bills, and some of them were definitely pink, hundred-dirham notes. She started to unfold one roll of bills and noticed there was a receipt mixed in with all the other money. She was just about to throw it away when she noticed it had writing on it. She peered at it in the dark; she was right in the middle of that one stretch where a street light had gone out. The darkest part of the walk. As she was coming back into the light she heard the near-silent wheels of the electric golf cart coming up behind her. She fumbled to stuff her money back into her bra before they rolled up on her. She put the note on the receipt back in her pocket. When she climbed onboard, Robert teased her for having walked in the first place when she knew the golf cart would catch up with her before she made it home. She wasn’t in the mood, told them she needed to walk a little in the fresh air; stretch her legs after standing all day. They left her alone, knowing this was bullshit; she had something on her mind. Who wants to walk a kilometer-and-half after working a twelve-hour shift?

When they got to the dorm, Robert asked her if she wanted to play some cards and have a nip of some Black Label. One of the regulars had given it to him for dog sitting, but she saw the light was off in her room. She hoped this meant Prissy was in someone else’s dorm, and she’d have some time to herself. She told the boys no thanks, and was disappointed when she squeaked
open the door to find Prissy already in bed. *Damnit, now I have to keep the lights off and be quiet.*

She undressed as quietly as she could and put all of the contents of hidden stash on her crisp bedspread beneath the glow of her phone. She flattened out the few tips from the day at the bottom of a suitcase that had an inconspicuous flap which buttoned up as a hiding place. Then she laid in her bed and couldn’t believe what she was reading. The note had the nice, engineered penmanship of a man, for sure. No woman she ever met wrote like this. Then, the very next thing she noticed was at the bottom—a slender, sharp-pointed heart. Also, not the voluptuous artistry of a woman.

Diwata read, “Anna, I think tomorrow you are off. Stand by the bus stop near the front gate, I will pick you up at 8:00 p.m. You will smile when you see me. Don’t want you in trouble, so keep this secret. If you don’t come, I will be so disappointed.”

She was smiling already. She shook her head at her luck, at how crazy this was. These kinds of things don’t happen to girls like her, poor and rundown already. She had never received a note like this since she was in middle school. She had been proposed to many times by drunks at the restaurant, but they were only fooling, trying to get a rise out of her in front of their friends.

She threw off her covers with excitement brimming from her blushing face to wake Prissy. She was just going to shake her awake to show her the note, but then she changed her mind. Whoever her secret admirer was, he was right. She could get in trouble for fraternizing with the customers. They had been trained about that when she first got here. It’s not like Prissy would ever snitch on her, but she *is* a Chatty-Cathy. Besides, she would probably try to talk her out of it, not out of concern, but out of jealousy for never having received such a secret letter herself.

She climbed back into bed and went over the whole day in her head. *Who could it be?* The last obnoxious customers who wouldn’t leave handed her something with a smile, but she was sure she’d never seen them before. There were a few Emirati soldiers who came in at lunch who spoke
very good English. Probably better than her, and they were very flirty and grinning ear to ear. But she hoped the note wasn’t from an Emirati. She knew their reputation with women. After being separated from girls their whole lives, they didn’t know how to court a woman. It could have been one the guys in the flight jumpsuits; they’d been in a lot recently. But she thought she knew who it was. She was a little deflated when she pictured him, but this could be the opportunity she was waiting for. He was no Prince Charming, but he also wasn’t her poor Filipino husband back home in Manila being supported by her, now was he. This guy wasn’t that bad. If it was who she thought it was, he couldn’t be all that bad. Whoever it was, if she liked him, she was going to start by telling him her real name.
Del Toro had briefed me about much of his seminar when he was going over his slides and reciting his presentation out loud to himself. So, when he started lecturing, I was more familiar with the information than the rest of the audience, which sent me into...into...not exactly daydreaming...more like lucid fretting. I was imagining where our country was headed with such gloomy realities as the carrot in front of our cart now. I was just old enough to remember what we had once been; old enough to know from whence we had come.

When I was a boy in the 70’s, we had just become a nation. We lived in mudbrick houses under a palm oasis irrigated by a *falaj* irrigating system from underground springs. We didn’t know that air-conditioning existed, and we were a wealthy family with many camels, goats, and donkeys. I marveled at the new buildings as they started to rise slowly out of the dirt, was amazed when they installed the first paved road. My mind wandered to my father, who was just about as old as the *sheikh* who was addressing Del Toro right now. My father and this *sheikh* would have grown up almost assuredly knowing each other or being somewhat or somehow related through marriage or blood or at least through neighborly passing. My father’s humble family wasn’t a part of the political infighting between the founding *sheikhs*, but he once told me that the worst crime they experienced when he was a young boy was a great chicken thief – *al harami* – which caused a great stir in their little isolated village. This *harami* was as sly as a long-eared fox that slinks through the night – *al thaelab*.

At first, they didn’t notice a few hens missing at all because my grandmother was rich with chickens, but it wasn’t long before she couldn’t help but notice fewer bobbing heads clucking around the yard each morning. Then, they assumed it was a fox; it had to be. Only a fox could get in and out of a chicken coop without leaving a trace. Maybe a wolf, too – *al theeb* – but, by
that time, their numbers were already hunted down to handfuls, so they kept closer to the mountains.

Finally, my grandmother noticed one of her prettiest, plumpest chickens being sold at the market two villages over when she made the long camel journey one week to visit her sister who was about to give birth. In fact, whenever grandmother told the story, she always made sure to mention that particular chicken was meant for her sister as a wedding gift, and there it was sitting in someone’s stall at the market. She said, *Foxes aren’t that stupid; a fox would have taken the stolen chicken at least three villages away!*

Back then, it caused a feudal divide in the community that would have been solved with violence. There were no police, no laws, only war. It made the entire region tense with animosity because the chicken-monger refused to name who had provided him the chickens to be sold at his market, conveniently claiming not to remember. *With all the chickens and livestock I deal with, what is one chicken from another?* he had shrugged and my grandmother had almost attacked him for his indifference.

None of my family members were allowed to get caught out alone during that time. Revenge would have come swiftly, at the end of sword or a knife, perhaps even a rifle if someone was lucky enough to have owned one. My relatives had their suspects and catching any one of them alone on a dusty path or napping beneath a palm tree would have been dealt with likewise and wouldn’t be discovered till the next morning. I remember my father telling us about how uneasy the townsfolk were, how untrustworthy they were, wondering who had caused so much trouble. Eventually the thievery stopped, and no one ever came to justice for it. It left a rift between families that are still there to this day, superficially. We still badmouth them, and they reciprocate. Just as I was contemplating how our world, once writ so small, had become such a
prominent player, centerstage, I snapped back to the seminar I was hosting. I tuned-in to Del Toro’s explanation about why he thought the killer could not have come from an impoverished country.

He replied to the old man, “That’s correct. Many of these crime scenes you’ve investigated, and the ones we have never discovered, would have involved a lot of time and privacy. So, he would probably need a house or at least a secluded apartment where he wouldn’t be noticed…doing his work. And his favorite toy would be his car, maybe even several. He’s likely a professional, making a decent salary, probably a Western expat.”

Mansour Abdullah stood up from the back and countered, “Yes, yes, you explained that, but our visa policy requires a background check for people applying to be residents here. How would he have gotten a work visa with a criminal record?”

Del Toro began to explain, “The UNSUB probably would have learned at an early age that his behavior was getting in the way of his freedom, so he would have altered his actions to keep out of trouble as an adult. Somehow, I believe he may have avoided a serious criminal record as an adult. I mean, the F.B.I. has done a lot of research into serial killers over the years, but there are still those they never apprehended at all, so we know nothing about what created those individuals or how they avoided detection.”

Almost as if to agitate our presenter, Officer Mansour Abdullah asked in a way that made it hard to tell if he was being serious or not, “What if we went to every foreigner’s house and looked for evidence?”

Del Toro shrugged his shoulders and said, “If you have the legal authority…”

“We do,” Officer Mansour Abdullah snapped, which earned him a sharp look from the older administrator. He took the hint and resumed his seat.
Del Toro replied, “You can certainly do that, but it is going to violate a lot of innocent people’s lives and freedoms,” he shared a rasied eyebrow with Mansour Abdullah, “and I’m sure you can imagine how that would feel.” Mansour Abdullah glowered at Del Toro, and I contemplated intervening as a peacekeeper, but the old sheikh seemed to take up Mansour Abdullah’s cause, saying, “People’s comfort is a small issue if it ends the problem.”

“I understand that you can do that, and I almost applaud that kind of direct action, but we know that this guy is clever and that he seeks power and attention. He seeks praise. If you give him a time to shine, he will probably take it up with open arms. Something like that could amp up his behavior. Also, if he hears around town, as I’m sure he would quite quickly, that houses are getting raided, he could easily pack up and run.” The room buzzed with a hush of muffled conversations, and I thought of the bitterness the chicken thief had left behind. What would this leave on our palates?
Chapter 52

(Al Manhal Disstrict Umm Al Emarat Park and Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club, recent past - Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Britney Sommer scampers from room to room with the frenetic pace of a hummingbird, preparing for the completion of her ten-thousand daily steps. She has her phone pinned to her cheek with her shoulder, and she’s not paying much attention to the conversation. These steps she is squandering in search of her fanny-pack infuriate her, so she puts on her step-counter when she notices it on the counter. She has finally located her fanny-pack beneath yesterday’s workout clothes and loads it with a water bottle, towelette, and her keys. All she need is her phone. *Where’s the damn phone?* Then she returns her attention back to the one-sided conversation that’s been going on without her and remembers that she had her phone pressed to her face the whole time. Finally joining in, she says, “I know, I know. I’ve seen the news.”

Her friend, Yolandi the most current person on all-things-American, including pop-culture, history, and politics. But she happens to be South African with the strongest Afrikaans accent Britney has ever encountered. Yolandi is on the line, “Why didn’t you go running earlier. It’s going to be dark in, like, five minutes.”

“Are you nuts? I can’t go running in the day time. Do you know how God-awful it is out there?”

“I know; it’s horrible. Why do you bother exercising anyway?” Yolandi is pudgy, and Britney has been trying to draw her into her miserable health-kick obsession, but she knows better than to tell Yolandi she needs it.

Instead, she says, “You should join me next time?”

“Oh, should I?” she pauses and Britney thinks she’s serious contemplating it, then Yolandi says, “NOT it! Not happening. Like you said, it’s too damn hot! Only fools run in that shit.”
Britney laughs, “I left my book in my car the other day, and when I picked it up, all the pages fell out because the binding’s glue had melted.”

“Don’t tell me you’re running alone,” she says with a mouth full of food, which Britney can tell is certainly not an apple or a celery stick.

“Normally, I go running with a partner, but he couldn’t make it today,” moving from the kitchen to the foyer, Britney puts her foot up high on the arm of the hat-rack bench by the front door to tie her shoes and stretch at the same time.

“Ou-la-la, your running partner’s a HE? Do tell!”

“Yes, he’s a HE. And he runs with me most of the time, but he couldn’t make it today.”

“Could this turn into…something.”

“No, he’s not going to turn into something.”

“Why the hell not? You’re both all panting, hot and sweaty. You’re halfway there,” Yolandi say, breathing heavy into the phone.

“Don’t get yourself all hot and bothered thinking about it because I told you he was busy today.”

“Too busy doing what? BEING MARRIED?” Yolandi yelled so loudly it sounded like she was eating the phone.

“Yes, he’s married, and, yes, that’s why he couldn’t come today.”

“Why are you wasting your time hanging out with married couples anyway?”

“Single people can have married friends, too.”

“No, they can’t.”

“Ahhhh, yes. They. Can. What do you think you are?

“I’m not married. I’m co-habitating like a motherfucker, that’s all.”
Britney switches her phone to her ear buds, and attaches the phone to an armband on her shoulder. She snaps the fanny pack buckle securely and positions it tightly at the small of her back. She exits her apartment and starts jogging in the direction of the Abu Dhabi Golf Club. She only has a few blocks to go. Yolandi can tell that she is exiting the house and is patiently waiting without a word until she says, “Oh my God! You’re sleeping with him already, aren’t you?”

Britney mouths the word, shit before speaking, “No, of course not. He’s married!”

There’s a longer pause, and it’s not because Yolandi is being patient, “Oh. MY. GOD. You’re already sleeping with him for sure, you shameless slut! Yes, you go girl.”

Britney makes some obvious static sounds and says, “Oops, you’re breaking up; losing you. Hanging up now!” but she doesn’t hang up, she says, “Shit, I should have driven to the golf club to run.” Outside, she passes workers and an Emirati man walking back from the call-to-prayer with his two young boys. He gives her a dirty look, and she realizes how inappropriately dressed she is. She adjusts her midriff sports top, pulling it down as far as it can go, but then she feels her breasts start to make their way out of the top instead. With her weak pace slightly above a brisk walk, it’s going to be a long run this exposed.

Yolandi says, “Yeah, you should have because I can see you now.”

“Shut up.”

“No, no, really I can. Let me see, you’re wearing that little pink halter top sports bra with your nipple showing and your titties bouncing around like two cats in a bag, aren’t you?

Britney mouths the word shit again, “Oh man, I didn’t want to drive down the street to the Golf Club. I didn’t even want to work out today. I was just having workout-guilt because I know you’re going to make me drink too much tonight.”

“Oh yeah, I’m going to make you drink.”
“Yeah, you are, and I just wanted to get my steps in to counteract all the fat I’m going to put on tonight, so it’s your fault.” She looks to the sky and a rare desert storm seems to have moved in while she was in her apartment getting ready. The sun is quickly blotted out with clouds, making the night come on quicker than usual in this neighborhood she’s jogged a hundred times. She leaves the busier, familiar street for a shortcut that should get her past the park and to the Golf Club sooner. It is a dusty expanse between buildings, full of weeds, and she glad to be out of the way of judgmental eyes.

Yolandi finally says, “Bitch, you should have driven to the golf club. With the news and everything, you had to go and get your steps? Are you dumb?”

“I know, I know, but really how unsafe can it be? I mean this guy they’re talking about…”

“Yeah, the one who dumps people in alleys or buries them in the desert.”

“Yeah, yeah, this boogeyman there making him out to be. They haven’t even determined if it’s the same guy, and where he’s been hitting? He’s targeting Dubai and Al Ain; he’s not going to hit here, too.”

“And you have your jiujitsu, too.”

Britney stifled a quack of a laugh, “Ha, I have my white belt in jiujitsu. Okay, really now, will you let me get a better pace going here, so I can finish my run, please?”

“Oh, girl. All your heavy breathing and talking about sleeping with hot, sweaty, married men has gotten me all excited. Bye,” Yolandi hung up before Britney could say, I never said I slept with him!

Britney rounds a corner out of the alley, and the street is especially dark. She’s trying to run and fiddle with her fanny-pack behind her back at the same time, zipping her earbuds into the pouch without having to stop. She locks a thousand-yard stare onto the curving entrance of the
golf club lit up in the distance, but it’s a long way off. A hunched-over, old Emirati lady, wearing a *burqa* seems to have appeared in her path out of nowhere. She can see the gleam of the old woman’s metal face-plate reflecting the streetlights every time she looks up from her labored walk. She’s cloaked in a full *abaya* and *shayla*, and Britney thinks *Oh, great, look what I’m wearing.* She thinks about crossing over to the other side of the street, but it’s too late. She’s almost upon her. She can hear the clack of the woman’s cane tapping a slow beat that she hadn’t noticed in the darkness until she has gotten this close. She almost senses a gradual increase in her cane falls, as if the woman is late for something…hurrying. *Late for what? Late for dinner? Hurrying? Hurrying to end her ill-lit journey and ease her suffering? What’s the old lady rushing off to?*

Britney’s just going to avoid eye contact with the traditionally-dressed Emirati and ignore her, but she hears the old lady mumbling something harsh. Britney assumes the she condemning her for her inappropriate attire. The instant they pass each other, the old woman seems to levitate off the ground for a moment, mysteriously as a witch. A dollops of sound escapes Britney’s pursed lips, “No,” as she realizes the old witch has transformed into a broad-shouldered man. She attempts to pivot and run, but her ankle is hooked with the handle end of the cane. She spills to the floor, and wrestles with a scream competing with the yelp of pain from the road-rash on her palms. Almost to her feet again, the scream has won out, but she’s found herself listing sideways from a thwacking blow to her temple. He is instantly on top of her, his pelvis and full weight so smothering that she can see his pinched eyebrows and piercing eyes behind the *burqa* inches from her face.

With rote precision, she squares her forearms on his chest and performs a jiujitsu hip escape. She’s able to place one knee between him, and with one hand planted on the ground, she kicks out behind her and is able to stand. Somehow screaming seems like a distraction from her
decision to turn and run again. She takes a step and is halted at the waist by a powerful jerk on her fanny-pack, and an enveloping swath of darkness climbs on top of her and surrounds her neck, her waist, wrapped around her whole body. She’s clawing, clawing with pressed-on nails at her enveloped throat for air, but all she can find are fold of fabric, handfuls of black. As she is strangled and fading, she hears children screeching in play a few houses away, and a whisper beside her ear, chanting, “Ana Shaitan. Ana Shaitan. Ana Shaitan.”
We certainly didn’t think that Del Toro’s seminar would illicit such a confrontational response from the taskforce members, but I could understand where the resentment was coming from because I felt it, too. It was as if Del Toro’s presence was a further extension of the killer. A part that we could jeer at and curse. Another member stood up to counter Del Toro, “How could he increase his behavior? He’s already killing and…and…abusing the bodies. What else can he do?” It was more a rally cry of frustration than an actual question. We all knew how the killer could get worse; he could produce more bodies.

I was ready to stand up and settle the troops down, but they managed to quiet themselves on their own when Del Toro answered his rhetorical question straight on, “There is plenty he can do. He can increase the torture and pain of the victims he keeps. He could spend more time with them, hold them captive longer. Then, set them free by way of death. He could hold them as slaves indefinitely if his housing situation allows. It has been done before. Women have been enslaved for years.” I could see that the audience who had come here with the intentions of putting on a good face, to be attentive and diligent were seeing things in a new, depressing perspective. Whereas they felt desperate and angry for justice before, now they looked lost and hopeless. Then, Del Toro said something that froze the room, “As we know, he has already changed targets to include higher risk individuals.”

Someone behind me spoke up, “Please, explain,” and Officer Mansour Abdullah added, “Yes, please elaborate.”

Del Toro said, “Look, we know that he has targeted low-income female workers that would be easier to separate from a group, away from their comfort zones. He could persuade these lower-risk victims into a private meeting, but I think his latest target indicates that he may be picking
victims that are more enticing to him, more alluring. And those would likely be higher-status individuals, so he’s not punishing prostitutes or someone who would compromise their morals for a payday. Killers like this we could probably catch on a sting operation in high prostitution areas using female undercover agent. Those kinds of killers are punishing the women for being sex workers; they think they’re doing society a favor by getting rid of them. Our UNSUB picks beautiful women. He has a type. A standard. Even those low-income women were exceptionally pretty. They stuck out; they were not plain or run-of-the-mill. No, our guy is after more.”

I speak up for the first time, “Like what?”

“I’m sure you know already…like Westerns…“ Del Toro said, looking at me in the eyes, sullenly. Then making eye contact with Officer Mansour Abdullah at the back of the room, “And Emiratis. Like our latest victim, Saarah Khalil. Like our missing American, Britney Sommers. Which would really create a lot of attention for our UNSUB. But now I think this is where your culture plays a very unwanted role. He wants more and more. He wants what is difficult to obtain; it’s enticing. And what is more enticing than a woman completely covered up except for her beautiful face? Or perhaps only the eyes? I think only the eyes would be enough to attract him to a target.” The room erupted once again at the suggestion that more of our fellow countrymen, our sisters, our daughters could end up displayed in utter humiliation on the street, or in an alley, or pinned up as an autopsy photo.
Chapter 54
(Al Bateen District – Spinney’s Souq Extra Supermarket parking lot – Al Ain, U.A.E. – Present day)

Maitha Saeed is spindly petite. Even draped in her abaya, she looks pixie thin, like an everlasting pubescent. Which she hates. She is set to graduate from Abu Dhabi University this month, so her father relies on her recently to run the kind of errands he claims he’s too old and tired to do himself these days. Like running to the grocery store late at night for baby formula. She has baby brother twenty years her junior from a new stepmother. Maitha Saeed is the oldest of eleven children, and all of her siblings from her own mother are sisters. All of her siblings from her father’s second wife are boys. Her father always summons over the oldest brother from the other house to chaperon her to the store; Bakhit Saeed is eleven years old.

With her dad’s Mercedes keys in hand, she bumps into Bakhit Saeed at the door and feigns disgust. He’s a sweaty mess. She can hear her other brothers and sisters playing on their soccer field, yelling for Bakhit to hurry up so he can come back and finish the game. He barks at her with an angry, bushy brow in Arabic to come on and hurry up – Tal! – like he’s her father, like he’s in charge. She moves even slower. It’s late at night, almost midnight, and they have their private, little soccer field lit up on the side of the house by floodlights. The courtyard where the cars are parked is in darkness, obscured by the huge house.

When Bakhit Saeed gets to the car and climbs in the passenger seat, he stares at her in the light of the cab as if meeting her for the first time. She laughs and says, “What are you staring at, you creep?” When they’re alone with her, she makes all of her younger siblings speak English, but he doesn’t answer her at all. Still gawking at her, she reaches up towards the cab ceiling and flicks off the interior light before it can go off by itself. She knows what he’s thinking. That she looks different, like a woman. That she has too much make up on. That they’re only going to the grocery store that’s closing in about fifteen minutes. Even though she doesn’t intend on getting
out of the car, she doesn’t want to risk being seen out in public looking like she’s thirteen years old. Her earrings are heavy gold, her make-up, magazine worthy.

It takes less than five minutes to drive to Spinney’s Souq Extra, but when they get there the parking lot is so empty she thinks they’re too late. Her little brother tells her like she’s stupid that, of course, they’re still open; it’s Ramadan hours. She wants to slap him, but the last time she did that, he didn’t hesitate to punch her in the arm. She was bruised for days. The streetlamps around the supermarket radiate an impoverished orange light, and when they park under the shaded canopy, it is even harder to see.

Her little brother explodes out of the car the second she comes to a stop, and she has to grab him by the kandura, “You don’t even have any money, you idiot!”

He laughs and sits back down as she teases him with the dirhams, giving and snatching away, giving and snatching away, “This time I want a candy bar, too. Don’t just think of yourself.” He nicks the money out of her hand and rushes off to complete the mission. He stops and looks back at her in annoyance when she blows the horn. Snickers bar, she yells through the window, but he points to his ears like he can’t hear. Snickers bar, she repeats, and she rolls down the window anyway to remind him not to forget the baby formula. It that short span of time, the heat tries to come in and mangle her make-up with tiny beads of sweat dotting her brow and upper lip. She can feel the perspiration penetrate through her foundation. She dabs at it effetely with the sleeve of her abaya without diverting her attention from the endless parade of social media content she’s flipping through.

Her eyes dart up from the glow of her phone at the sudden appearance of a slow figure shuffling past her car on the sidewalk in front of the supermarket. Upon recognizing that it’s only a traditional old grandma with a burqa, she barely takes her eyes from the tepid entertainment.
The elderly woman’s shadow cast from the parking lot streetlamps crawls across Maitha Saeed’s face and pauses by the rear passenger door window. So fine is the construction of her father’s S-class Mercedes, she doesn’t hear the back-passenger door opening until she feels the slight sucking change of pressure in the cab when the air-conditioning escapes. When she turns around, she sees the old lady plop down in the backseat with a tired sigh. The old lady mutters, “Yahla,” and a startled spurt catches in Maitha Saeed’s throat. Then she stifles a laugh, wondering if she should livestream this pitiful granny on her Instagram. She twists around to face the backseat and says in Arabic, “My love, you’re in the wrong car,” as soothing and supplicating as she can.

The old lady, hunched and panting, sounds a thousand years old, “Daena nadhhab – Let’s go.”

Maitha Saeed can’t believe her luck at the internet goldmine that just landed in her lap. As she fumbles to activate her camera, she repeats, “Auntie, my dear, you’re in the wrong car.” Then her better judgment takes control; it’s illegal to film or photograph anyone without their consent, especially women. She could only imagine what would happen if someone’s old grandma went viral from her account. The awkward situation paralyzes Maitha Saeed. She doesn’t know what to do. She begins looking around the parking lot for the car this demented old prune belongs to, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone nearby. She turns back to the old woman who’s trembling in a geriatric daze in the darkened back seat. Maitha Saeed wrings her hands, waiting for her little brother to come back to the car and help. What’s taking him so long? More exasperated, she tries again, “Do you need help? Come, my love, I will take you to your family.”

Maitha Saeed turns around and places her hand on the door handle to exit the car when she’s throttled around the throat from behind by an attack as swift as a snake strike. Her neck is so frail and thin, she can feel two hands gripped all the way around her windpipe until her head...
feels like it will pop off. She manages to beep the horn lightly before she’s dragged over the center console and into the backseat with this horrible thing too strong to be woman, stronger than anything she’s ever experienced in all her rough-and-tumble life with her marauding brothers. She’s fighting with a wild animal strength, clawing and scratching at everything, anything, nothing. The pressure of blood being compressed into her face ruptures something in her eyes. She sees stars in the blackness when, somehow, she’s able to gulp in one wheezing gasp before her mouth is stuffed with something cloth all the way to the depth of her tonsils. With the full weight of a knee on her spine and her girlish arms wrenched behind her back, she can hear bones crunch and feel them shift out of place beneath her skin. She’s zip-tied around her wrists with a swift, practiced movement, her ankles pulled up and hoggied to her hand restraints with the quick buzz of a third zip-tie.

She now finds herself on the floor of the backseat, head turned to stare into the eyes of a McDonald’s Happy Meal Smurf beneath the driver’s seat, lying down like her, head wrenched to the side. It’s smiling in her teary, gagged face, make-up streaked and smeared. Her captor steps on her body, springing to the front seat with a grunting, bestial quickness. The old woman has transformed to this thing before her very eyes.

She feels the inertia of her own father’s car reverse, stick to a stop, then rev forward, making the plastic toy figurine roll closer to her face. She thinks about how her brother is going to search for her in the parking lot when he comes out, how he will never stop looking for her ever again for the rest of his life. This blurs her vision with tears, and she shuts tight her eyes, unable to face the cartoon smile of her little sister’s plaything ogling her from beneath the seat.
Chapter 55

(Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Fairmont Bab Al Bahr Hotel)

The next morning, I heard a knock at my door, and it was the room service breakfast I had forgotten I requested to be sent to my room every day. So, it must have been 7:00 a.m. on the dot. Creased in half on the serving tray was the slick-paged *Khaleej Times*, which is not printed on the pulpy newsprint like our newspapers. I sat down, stabbed a triangle of toast into my yoke, and unfolded the paper. The second I saw it, I didn’t know whether to strangle my new friend or congratulate him. The front page read, *Alleyman Strikes Again?* by Alan Barret. I said, “No! No, he didn’t, Bren! Would you look at this! Alan gave him a nickname!” I got to pacing as usual, wondering how the taskforce was going to take it. They were going to have to replace the carpet when I checked out; I was wearing down a path. “Oh, boy the suspect is going to love this. He’s going to gobble this up. I’ve got to talk to Alan again. We might be able to tease the Alleyman in the papers. Piss him off. He might slip up.” Of course, I knew that pissing him off would lead to more victims, but more victims meant more evidence, meant more mistakes. I settled back down to my breakfast, intent on actually reading the article. I had just taken a sip of my morning coffee when I nearly spit it out, “Holy shit, we’ve got a second missing Emirati girl!” Alan was obviously both a magician and a fool to have run this story without so much as a confirmation from us.

The article indicated that a young woman was reported missing late last night, meaning: Either Alan had an informant from the police force in his pocket that would release such information for money, or the family went straight to the press with their story. I was guessing the latter. The family must have been stonewalled with their report the same way the others were, so they took it to the media instead. “Why the fuck wouldn’t the taskforce call me, Brenda! This is some bullshit! They’re leaving me out of the loop, again. Why? Just…why? I don’t get it.” After reading the article, I, too, was convinced this was the work of our UNSUB.
First of all, the girl was young, inexperienced, innocent, dutiful, and, coincidentally, cursed with beauty. Then, the missing person, M.S. – they don’t print the names of victims or suspects here in the U.A.E., only the initials – wouldn’t have abandoned her ten-year-old brother at the supermarket in the middle of night, during Ramadan no less? Definitely not. The family was adamant that she would have never done something like this on her own free will, and I had to agree. People can’t just run off here and join the circus. The U.A.E. is too small for someone to think they could just pull up stakes and bugger off somewhere to escape their old life and start a new one. It might be possible in a country the size of America, but it would be much harder here, and from every indication in the paper, this young lady wouldn’t have had the necessary motivation to do so, nor the know-how.

I was expecting a call or a knock at the door from Detective Khalifa Saeed any minute, and, sure enough, he was there outside my room in short notice. I accosted him, “What gives?” shrugging with my hands in the air, “Pardon my French, Detective, but why the hell am I reading about a missing person in the paper instead of hearing it from you?” Detective Khalifa Saeed looked admonished and as disappointed as I was. He smacked his palm with his own rolled-up copy of the same morning-edition sitting next to my cold eggs.

He said, “Whalah, I swear, we were caught off guard, too. Someone on the scene or close to the family called the press the same time we got there. This writer must have written the story as he stood there at the scene!”

“We’re going to have to grill him.”

“Yes, we are because we haven’t released an official statement. We may have to charge the newspaper. This might be illegal!”
“If you inspect the verbiage, you can see that he’s very careful not to mention any of our involvement at all. He doesn’t mention the police or the investigation or the taskforce or anything. He simply claims that all the information comes directly from the immediate family. It’s a pretty fair assumption that it’s our guy, though. It seems to fit. What is the policy for missing persons?

“Normally, it’s a forty-eight hour wait before we make an official report.”

“Perhaps the family called the press because the police weren’t willing to take the report? We have to get to the bottom of this.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed said, “I’ll make some calls and get 999 transcripts. I’ll meet you at the convention center when you give your seminar in a few minutes,” but I barely heard him, I was so distracted with this new revelation about the Alleyman nickname. I plopped down on the edge of my disheveled bed, and called the number Alan gave me. He surprised me by answering on the first ring. He didn’t get a chance to utter a greeting before I said, “Alan, what the holy fuck! The police are barely pulling up their panties, and you’re reporting a missing person? I thought you said you were afraid for your well-being?”

Alan said through the other line, quite delighted with himself, “Whoa, whoa, keep your panties on! You know I’m not at liberty to reveal our sources, but it was called into us almost immediately.”

“BY WHOM?”

“By someone.”

“By someone? BY SOMEONE! Have you lost your…” I was so infuriated I was already sweating through my newly pressed shirt. I put the phone on speaker for the duration of my tie-tightening ritual and resumed, more calmly, “As I was saying, have you or your team there at the
paper stopped to think that this *someone* might be the killer calling in his own crimes? Please, please, tell me the call is recorded?"

I hear the squeak of a door hinge and a click, some shuffling like the mouthpiece of the phone is being slid across fabric, then Alan whispers, “Look, I’m putting my ass on the line here, but I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you. One of the family members called it in to us to get the ball moving on their missing relative. That’s all I can say.”

“For fuck’s sake, I’ll…I’ll call you later,” I said and hung up in a huff.
Chapter 56

(Capital Gate Building - Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Now I know what Del Toro has been going through. The stress of demanding information and having to wait churns my stomach. We’re waiting on the 999 transcripts, but at least our team was able to put together a quick presentation by repeating the gist of the emergency call. Del Toro has his hands on his hips, and I can see him scanning the room and shaking his head. He’s disappointed that so many members of the taskforce are absent from today’s seminar. He begins passing out copies to everyone in attendance, and says, looking directly at me, “It’s unfortunate that there are less people here today than usual as this is a very important seminar.”

I say, “I’m sorry. Many of the officers are still working certain details of the missing persons report,” which I made up on the spot. They were told that the meetings were voluntary by the administration, and they simply choose not to attend. I decided I would make them mandatory without the admin’s permission.

Special Agent Del Toro begins, sternly, “Okay, then the rest of you will have to be responsible for passing on this information. What you have in front of you is the profile I have compiled.” The room comes to life as people rush to their seats to put on their headsets and start flipping through pages, nodding in understanding and perusing the material with eager curiosity.

Del Toro continues, “If you follow along with the document I gave you, we are looking for a highly intelligent individual, works some kind of professional job that requires a lot of skill or training, someone with a lot education. Could be a doctor, a lawyer, accountant, pilot, professor, whatever. In other words, a respectable job. Something that took a lot of dedication to achieve. This may seem contradictory to the crimes he’s committing, but it speaks more to the obsessive nature that allowed him to focus on his studies and only his studies at the time. When he went for his training or education, he would have gone all in. To the point where it would have been
noticeable to others. His dedication to his studies would have been over-the-top fanatical, bookworm-ish off-putting, and pedantic to others.” Everyone is preoccupied looking at the full report, and many of the taskforce members are wincing at the near incomprehensibility of the foreign language in front of them. Their English just isn’t good enough to handle such a report, but I commend them for trying. I put them at ease by standing up and reminding them that an Arabic copy was on its way soon. Then, I thank Allah that the translator is piping such accurate rapid-fire translation into their ears.

No one raises their hands or speaks up, so Del Toro continues, “He’s going to be thirty to forty years old. He’s going to be very attached to his car. His car is his buddy, his old reliable. He’s going to be driving a Sports Utility Vehicle, plain in color, beige or white. Our UNSUB is going to be very unassuming.”

An audience member stops him, “Unassuming? In what way?”

Del Toro flips a page and points at it, “He’s not going to be the kind of person who wants to be at the center of it all. He’s not the kind of person who feels comfortable with that, so that’s why he turns to this kind of stuff, to replace that attention he’s grown so bitter about missing all his life. Because in real life, his public life, he’s going to be debilitatingly shy or he might be unattractive.”

This strikes me as very curious, so I ask, “But he won’t be both?”

Del Toro shrugs his shoulders, “Could be both, but I’m thinking it is either one or the other because he is able to move through society, and if he were both, he would stick out to everyone. He’d be a total misfit. He’s not a total misfit. Remember, he has managed to accomplish some things in life. I’m leaning towards someone who isn’t physically attractive, someone who women wouldn’t necessarily be too excited to see.”
Someone coughs, “Mansour Abdullah,” and they all laugh, including Mansour Abdullah himself.

Del Toro fights a smile and tries to reconvene the audience, “Gentlemen, gentlemen, I’m serious. Remember, there’s a reason he targets beautiful women. He has resentment.”

An attendee raises his hand before speaking, “What is he? What’s your guess? An expatriate?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you might have flipped ahead to page three. My guess is that he is a Westerner, but, BUT, of course, we can’t be too sure. And we can never assume. However, if he is some other nationality, his complexion or his thick accent, or something about the way he looks or speaks will be a sore spot for him. He will be embarrassed and ashamed of it. It doesn’t have to be something this specific. It could be anything about the UNSUB that draws attention to himself and embarrasses him. It could be anything, a limp, a stutter, a hideous scar, a wonky eye, a glass eye, cross-eyed-ness, wall-eyed-ness, a funny walk, could be pigeon-toed, penguin-toed, effeminate mannerisms, perhaps a diminutive stature, anything that would give him a self-perception of shame, embarrassment, inferiority.”

Each seating station has a computer embedded in the desk where any of the attendees can write their questions in Arabic and hit enter. Then a raised hand symbol pops up on the projected screen, letting the presenter know there’s a question from the audience. Del Toro notices it and finds the gentlemen in the audience who asks, “Could it be a person’s skin color, too. You know, that they are ashamed of?”

“Certainly, it could. It could. That’s why we can’t rule out people from other countries because it could be, say, an Indian who doesn’t like his skin color, or a Black man.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah asks, “So you still think he is an immigrant, an expat?”
“My best guess is that he is…and from a Western country. Normally offenders like this do not cross ethnic lines, but as we know, this one does. That itself contributes to our findings and helps our profile.” Del Toro says, eliciting the minutest of smiles from Mansour Abdullah and many of the others.

Del Toro continues, “Let’s understand something. He may not be unattractive physically. His shame would stem from not being able to meet the kind of women that he fixates on, his ideal woman that, at one point, he would have liked to have had as a partner. His shame would have come from him not being able to meet or interact in a normal courtship with these kinds of women because he would come off as a misfit or an outside. This just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. He comes off as an outside, so he’s treated like an outsider, then he becomes an outsider, trying not to be an outsider. It would turn into a cycle he couldn’t escape. For this reason, he started punishing women and now that’s all he knows. We will know him when we’ve got him locked in a room and we’re hitting him with hard questions. That sore spot will stick out and we’ll probably be able to figure out what it is if we can’t see it physically on him right away. However, by everything we know about offenders like this, he’s likely a white male who would identify as heterosexual. He’s likely single, but if he is married, his wife is subservient and meek.”

The audience again titters in agreement until I chime in for the sake of being the Devil’s advocate, “He could be Arab, too, then?”

Another colleague scoffs, “Maybe some Arab, but not Emirati. No. Never.”

Another says, “No, no, I agree. If he’s from an Arab country, he’s not Muslim, for sure.”

The audience breaks into a discussion among themselves again and Del Toro has to quiet them down, “Gentlemen, gentlemen, if he’s Arab, he will know both languages well, maybe even some other languages. Remember he’s sophisticated, educated, intelligent, but other traits of inferiority
will always be lurking there. He’ll try to hide it and may have gotten good at hiding it, but it will be there. And…if you’ll turn to page five,” there is a uniform sound of shuffling papers, “…you’ll see that part of this shame stems from an overbearing religiosity, which he has subsequently rejected and now resents. So, he would have had a falling out with his religion…and even his Arabic traditions and culture…if he’s Arab.”

“An Arab man like this would stick out easily, I think,” said an officer near the aisle, “Like this, he could not blend into our society.”

“As your handout explains, he may have travelled and realized that he doesn’t like certain aspects about Arabic society, like arranged marriages or praying five times a day.”

The same gentleman adds with confidence, “Like I said, this would be very apparent to us.”

“That’s if he lets it be known,” I say on Del Toro’s behalf, and I get some stinging sideward glances, but I continue anyway, “He could keep those feelings secret.”

Del Toro comes to my rescue, “Yes, agreed, but to continue, he is going to be physically strong. But judging by the size of the women he has victimized, he might have something that keeps him from being too imposing. His victims have been very small, so he, himself, is probably small in stature but athletic, unassumingly strong. Or to show just how widespread this description of him goes, he could be a large person, but not matching the strength of someone his size. In that case, his size would compensate for his otherwise lack of strength. Now…” Del Toro pauses here for effect, it seems, “Here’s the kicker, gentlemen. I theorize that we are looking for a crossdresser.” Some of the room erupts in laughter as they know the English word before the Arabic translation filters through their headphones, but when it does the rest of the room joins in right behind them.
One of the officers from Dubai asks, “You mean a man who gets excitement dressing like a woman?” The men burst out laughing again, but Del Toro doesn’t seem amused. He remains very calm and puts his palms up in the air to quell their mockery.

He clarifies quite sternly, “Crossdressing can be considered its own paraphilia, especially more so in the past, before we recognized its commonplace and benignity, but I don’t think we’re looking for man who gets his kicks dressing like a woman. The UNSUB’s sexual needs are not being fulfilled by crossdressing. In this case, I’m implying our suspect dresses like a woman to disguise himself in plain sight. It’s purely utilitarian in nature.”

The room of machismo squirms and shifts, agitated at this thought, and one voices his outrage in Arabic, “That’s how this piece of dogshit has been doing it?”

I’m glad Del Toro can’t understand the next voice from the crowd that says, “Fuck his mother’s pussy from which he slithered!” – the translation of one of our more colorful curses. Another keeps it simple, calling the unknown suspect, a “Cowardly sneaking fox.”

Someone else addresses Del Toro in Arabic, “What the hell are you saying? What are we supposed to do with that information?” When Del Toro stands there, lost in the language, I remind the taskforce to use their English or to type their questions into the computers in front of them.

Del Toro finally resumes, “I understand this is all very upsetting, but allow me to finish because what I tell you next is going to be even more upsetting.” He looks nervous and readies himself with a sip of water, “Sorry, guys…ah and ma’am, I know it’s Ramadan and I’m not supposed to be drinking in front of you while you fast, but I really need it right now. Okay, he’s not just dressing as a woman. He’s dressing as an Arab woman.”

“Oh, this is camel shit,” Officer Mansour Abdullah says in Arabic loud enough to launch the room into an exodus towards the door. Another says, “We’re supposed to believe this
garbage,” and then in English, “Excuse us, Mr. Del Toro, but we’ve got to get back to work.” The meeting is adjourned by default, and Officer Mansour Abdullah is the first one out the door. I remain after to help Del Toro clean up and to apologize for the way the taskforce took his assessment so personally. He tells me, “Believe it or not, it happens more often then you’d think. I guess people don’t want to believe that their town could harbor something so…chaotic.”

“What make you think that the UNSUB is dressing like a woman?”

“It is just a guess, but I’ve read the reports you guys translated and some people claimed that they didn’t see anything unusual. They did say, however, they’ve seen some women exercising at night, and more than one person said they saw a woman by herself, walking. I think this might be how he achieves his blitzkriegs. Only time will tell, but it is definitely something we need to keep quite about. They all left in a huff, but you better get the team on board and make sure they don’t spring a leak. Or we’re done. We’re over; we’ll lose him for sure.”
Chapter 57
(Al Bateen Area – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

When the intense furnace of discontent builds to a menacing brink of combustion, the coals need stoking, the flame needs to exhaust its red heat to a soft ashen glow, but this is a task of patience and control. Sometimes the more immediate spin of a valve, releasing a jet of steam becomes an easier, irresistible temptation. He knows he has to stoke the coals by going out, but that’s complicated. He needs an immediate valve release. He knows that he has been frequenting the same area more than he should, but tonight he can’t resist the convenience of orbiting the confines of home. He doesn’t have the serenity to make a drive to another Emirate. Even though doing so would purchase the added protection of anonymity and create a contrived diversion for those seeking to capture him, but he loses some of the power that comes with knowing every corner, every wadi, shrub, darkened house, every hiding place, every overhanging branch.

This is an affluent neighborhood with homes enveloped in villa walls like compounds. Scattered throughout the neighborhood are similar large buildings that have been piecemealed into apartments or shared villas. It would be difficult to tell which buildings were which, but he knows well by now. Knows them all, who lives in them, and a rough estimate of how many. On his route is a dormitory of female workers from a restaurant called Shakespeare and Co. He’s seen their bus drop them off. Males are housed in tighter, larger buildings in poorer areas, so running into them won’t be a problem. Sometimes, these women walk home from the supermarket on their days off. He may have to take one of them if he’s desperate and hungry enough. Club her, assault her, tie her in the alley or in a bush until he can come back with his car and heave her into the trunk. This pent up, he’s willing to just assault her and leave her there, drained and tattered, a sloppy job, a quick sketch to relieve the pressure.
Though this is his last choice. He’s so tired of their ilk. He sees them all the time, worn and overworked even on their free time, walking all the way to the grocery store, which is not an easy stroll in this steamy late-night heat, the only time of day when the humidity comes out to annoy him. In the spring, if he’s ever wandering out until the next sunrise, the humidity becomes his friend, blanketeting the streets with a billowy fog on the ground so cloudy it’s like walking in a dream. The fog even deadens sound. The fog here is basically steam coming from the earth’s hot surface. At those times, he’s a fallen God, and all of heaven’s clouds have hit the ground.

He turns down an especially dark alley between villas to bisect the neighborhood. This alley is one of his beloveds. It extends from the street of one block, directly to another; however, it meets a crossroad alley in the middle that runs along the back wall of several villas on both sides of each street. Against all odds, a houseboy from one of the villas turns into the alley blocking his planned exit. It would be strange to encounter an old woman in the dirt alley, so he turns back in the darkness towards the other end of the alley from which he came. To his astonishment, another man has coincidentally chosen the same shortcut. He’s never been this unlucky. Both of the men are slack at the shoulders with exhaustion, and they’re watching their feet on the unsure path of weeds and rocks in the alley. He has a choice, continue on with his act as if there is nothing to be concerned about an old lady traversing the disheveled shortcut, or he can inch along the wall and hope he goes unseen until he reaches the T-junction of the crossroad alley.

He is obscured by midnight, so he flits along the alley as noiseless as possible, holding up the skirt of his abaya. He keeps his eyes on the approaching man who’s preoccupied with lighting a cigarette. He reaches the corner of the T-junction and dashes into the other alley. If either of them witnessed anything, they would rub their eyes and wonder at what they had just seen. A cat’s tail? Tendrils of a ghost? The mist of a djinn? A witch’s cloak?
No, no. Just a specter of the imagination.

He doesn’t wait for the two men to converge at the middle to discuss what one of them had seen or thought he has seen. *Did you see that?* in Bengali. The other one blinded by cigarette smoke saw nothing, nothing at all. As the witness rushes towards the T-junctions to catch a better glimpse of what confounds him, the chills running down his spine and the erect follicles dotting his arms set him to shivers when he finds the alley too unbelievably long and unbroken to be this empty. *Told you, completely empty,* the other one says, allaying his fears and superstitions.

The instant he turns down the right arm of the junction, out of sight of the approaching men, he darts a few meters to a point obscured by tree tops on the other side of the wall. Then, he leaps up onto the wall and perches there, steady as stone. The possibility of getting caught nipping at his composure, he scrambles over with little thought or care. His sleeve snags on a branch and rakes the *burqa* and *shayla* off his face. Luckily, the courtyard in which he’s found himself is silent and empty. A burble of the landscape’s drip system muddies the ground beneath his feet and soaks the tips of his abaya before he notices it. He tolerates his soaking socks, crouching and listening for any movement or voices. He hears none, and tears his caught *shayla* from the tree branches. He roars in compressed rage that his prized *burqa* doesn’t come down with it. He looks up into the thicket of leaves and sees nothing. He feels too exposed to spend any more time searching for it, so he hastens past the house and out the front gate of the villa before anyone decides to come outside the house.

He drops the old lady act. He pats himself all around, no injuries, cane secured to his back, *khanjar* at his waist. He walks tall now, brisk in movement, hips shifting slightly, arms pumping to facilitate the appearance of a fit woman, speed-walking. He heads for the *wadi,* cuts across, and in a flash, he’s on another block, out of danger, seething with spit and anger. His valve is open,
snorting through his nose and grumbling obscenities. He’s trying to spread the coals, even out the fire, but can’t. He’s burning too hot. Tries to cool himself, reassure himself, grunting through gritted teeth, “Ana Shaitan. Ana Shaitan,” but the muggy air doesn’t allow. He’s brimming with sweat; it’s rolling off him in streams. He’s roasting inside his costume, cooking, melting. He’s glad he spared no expense on the make-up, no smearing. Without his burqa, he resumes his disguise with a makeshift wrap of the shayla around his face, the way the young women wear them. There’s a way to do it so it stays secured to the face, but he’s not practiced enough. He notes that he’ll have to learn this skill for just such occasions. Correction: There will be no more occasions, no more risks. But for now, he looks a sloppy hag.

He decides to use a larger road that runs parallel to a wadi to reach his car faster, but it proves to be another blunder on this disastrous outing as a Range Rover slows down and rolls at her side as he, a fake woman, keeps walking. Expecting the worst, he glances sidewise without turning his head to assess the situation. When the SUV’s window begins to lower, he tightens the shayla to his face the way women here cover themselves whenever a man passes by. The engine revs and two Emiratis, one in the front passenger side and the other in the back, poke their entire torsos through the window, resting on their elbows. The driver and another young man in the back seat are straining to get a good look at “her.” A beer can sails a slow arch to the pavement beside her and clanks on the ground. The one in the passenger window says in Arabic, “Hey, sister, looks like you need a ride.”

The other drunken fool says, “No, she doesn’t. She moving faster than we are.” They explode into boisterous laughter, and another beer can arches through the air in her direction. She strides faster hoping they take the hint.
Again, they hound her, “What are you doing out here?” the young Emirati asks with mock concern, which comes off indignant and accusatory, “You shouldn’t be by yourself.”

The other joins in, “Where’s your chaperone?”

“Where’s your mother?” they take turns, “Where’s your brother?”

When the one up front speaks this time, he sounds very drunk, “Hey, we’re talking to you!” so does his partner, “Only sluts go out exercising alone at this time of night!”

“Are you a slut?” one of them yells. The driver pulls ahead, and right before he kills the headlights, she can read the SUV’s license plate, 54, which means the driver is either part of the royal family or someone very rich who has paid a lot of money for a two-digit license plate number. This time a quarter-pint bottle of whiskey hits her on the shoulder. She stops dead in her tracks, smoldering. There is no rake to stoke the coals. The steam valve has been snapped off. There is only molten hot rage. She rears up in a coil and lunches toward them with a piston kick to the passenger door and slashes across both doors with the khanjar, narrowly missing them both. Both young men in the windows retract inside the vehicle, yelping at the unexpected attack. Their friend in the back seat gets his phone out and pushes record in time to film the crazed woman come up the other side of the wadi and disappear into the neighborhood across the way. But he didn’t push record in time to capture the woman’s hissing threat before she disappeared into the dank, growling, “Ana Shaitan.”
Chapter 58

(Al Bateen Area – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

The next evening, the drunken Emiratis from the previous night were hanging out with a larger group of friends at Starbucks. By pure happenstance, one of the off-duty taskforce members from Al Ain, Officer Humaid Ateeq, happened to overhear an interesting conversation in Arabic, mid-dialogue, while he waited for his order.

“I don’t know if it was a joke or not, but that’s what happened!”

“You’re telling me that Umm Duwais attacked you guys last night?” one of the men who wasn’t there the night before asked skeptically.

“I know you don’t believe me, but she had knives for hands. She attacked us, and then disappeared.”

“Did she have goat feet, too?” The group of friends disrupted the cramped Starbucks with their thoughtless laughter – all except the four who had witnessed it. They didn’t laugh at all.

“No, no, you idiot, Umm Duwais doesn’t have goat feet; she has donkey feet,” the doubters agreed and fell out laughing again.

“I didn’t notice her feet, but she jumped into the wadi and over to the other side like an animal.”

“Yeah, like nothing I’d ever seen before!”

“Show them the video, show them the video!” In line, Officer Humaid Ateeq’s curiosity was switched on high alert, and he tried to lean in close to eavesdrop.

“Seriously? You have video?” The table of friends crowded around one of their phones as it played.

“Uggh, that’s really creepy.”

“Yeah, it is, but you can’t really see much.”
“I know, but it gives me goose bumps, and I can’t get it out of my mind.”

“Play it again. Look at this guy over here, he rides right by where she dissolved like salt, and he doesn’t react at all. He just rides by.”

“He must not have seen her, so where did she go. Uggh, creepy.”

“Like she really did dissolve into salt.”

“All I know is that we shouldn’t have accepted that whiskey from your uncle. That put us over the edge.”

“I know, I know. I’m never touching that stuff again.”

“Made me sick like I was sitting in bed.”

“It was evil.”

“During Ramadan, too, so evil.”

The crowd of young men could have all passed for thirty-years-old, but Officer Humaid Ateeq knew they were no more than twenty-one or twenty-two. As all seven of them got up to leave, he blocked them at the door with the flash of his badge.

It took Del Toro and Detective Khalifa Saeed only an hour to get to the Al Ain Police Directorate in the Al Jimi district. When they arrived, Officer Mansour Abdullah was there and had separated the four young men into adjoining rooms and heard pretty much the same story from each of them.

Del Toro leaned against a table with his arms fold over his chest trying to figure out why Mansour Abdullah and Khalifa Saeed were talking so excitedly in Arabic and looked so astonished. Eventually, Detective Khalifa Saeed turned to him, “These kids are saying *Umm Duwais* attacked them.” Officer Mansour Abdullah chuckled.

Del Toro repeated, “Umm-do-what?”
Khalifa Saeed and Mansour Abdullah, looking somewhat embarrassed, repeated, “Umm Duwais.”

Now Del Toro looked embarrassed for having to ask again, “Um-do-waste?”

“Umm Duwais, Umm Duwais,” Mansour repeated like Del Toro should know better.

“Okay, okay, Umm Duwais or whatever. What the hell is that?”

“Umm Duwais is a djinn,” Officer Mansour Abdullah explained.

“A famous one,” added Khalifa Saeed.

“A djinn? Like a genie…like you rub the lamp and the genie comes out…grants you three wishes. That kind of djinn?”

“Yes, that’s what you call a djinn, but to us, it’s an evil, evil thing,” Khalifa said, “Yes, like a demon, like black magic.”

“They believe in this stuff?” Del Toro asked incredulously.

“It’s not that they necessarily believe it’s a djinn, like a monster, but…they…I don’t know how to explain it,” Officer Mansour Abdullah turned to his compatriot for help, “It’s like people like us, Muslims, believe in Allah, but we also believe in Shaitan, the devil, and…”

Mansour Abdullah butted in, “And we believe Shaitan can be on earth in many ways.”

“Yes, for example, he can affect people, make them do things.”

“Yes, yes, like Shaitan can work through them, work through djinns, you know, get inside of them and influence them to do things, evil things.”

Del Toro cut them off, “Yeah, yeah, I get it, the devil-made-me-do-it defense. We have this in America, too.”

Detective Mansour Abdullah continued, “So, Umm Duwais is a djinn that every Emirati is taught when they are young.”
“It’s like a fairy tale to keep us from staying out in the streets or in the desert too late at night.”

“*Umm Duwais* is a female *djinn*, and she is supposed to have knives for hands and goat feet.”

“No, no, feet of a donkey.”

“And when she approaches…”

“Usually approaching men and boys!”

“She is always a very beautiful woman, but when you get close to her, she turns into an ugly, old *djinn* and kills you,” Officer Mansour Abdullah made the universal sound and hand gesture for slitting someone’s throat.

“We use this to scare children into avoiding strangers, or bad women…”

Del Toro asked, “Loose women, devoid of morals, you mean?”

Mansour Abdullah said excitedly, “Ah, like this, like this, this is the expression, loose women! And it teaches our children not to follow people they don’t know.”

“Ohmm, in my culture, we have something similar. We call her *La Llorona*, except she lures people by crying.”

“I see, I see,” Del Toro nodded, already heading for the door, “Let’s go talk to them.”

They walked over to a small conference room where the boys had been brought together again. They all had tiny teacups of *karak* tea, which they raised to the lawmen when they entered. Three of them stood up and greeted them with respect. One glowered in his seat but eventually rose like the rest of them. Del Toro didn’t have time for niceties, especially insincere ones, so he dove right in, “Tell us again what happened, and be as detailed as possible.”
The reluctant one said, “I can’t believe we’re in here for this. What did we do? I need to call my father. He’s related to the Sheikh.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah smirked, “Yeah, yeah, everyone’s related to the Sheikh. Just tell us what happened.”

“We told you ten times, we were driving by, and we stopped to talk to this woman who was exercising.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed sneered, “Stopped to talk to her? Why?”

Another one spoke up, “Because she was alone, and it was late at night, and…and she was walking fast, so…”

“We thought she was in trouble, so we offered her a ride.”

Del Toro, shot his partners a look, “Oh, they just wanted to offer her a ride, gentlemen, that’s all.”

“Come on, we are interested in your story because of something else, and we need to know all about this person,” Mansour Abdullah said sympathetically.

The quietest and most respectful of the boys opened up for the first time, “Okay, fine. We were, you know, kind of bothering her, and suddenly, she stopped and mumbled something really angry and just attacked us.”

Del Toro asked pointedly, “Are you sure it was a woman?”

“It looked like a woman, and she was dressed like a woman.”

“And she walked like a woman, “ the entitled one said.

Detective Khalifa Saeed continued, “You said she was walking fast, so how could you tell?”
The one with the worst English said, “Like a woman when exercising. They walk faster, like this,” he simulated a speed-walking posture around the room, arms in a fist, pumping, “And she have big boom, like this and like this.” He made a shapely hourglass motion in the air with his hands.

“Could this person have been a man?” Detective Khalifa Saeed asked, “Dressed up?”

“I guess, but I don’t think so. Not with this and this,” said one of them.

Another added, “It was really late and we were really tired.”

Del Toro prodded on, “You were intoxicated, too?” The four youngsters looked at each other, defeated but remaining silent.

“Look, guys,” Del Toro interceded, “we don’t care if you were drinking or not right now, we just need to know if you saw what you really saw.”

One of them finally came clean, “Yeah, we were drinking.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed asked, “How much did you have to drink?”

The quite one confessed, “I had so much whiskey, I couldn’t remember anything this morning.”

“Me, too. I completely forgot about it when I woke up, and then suddenly, I remembered and I checked my phone and saw the video. Then I remembered it all.”

They all chimed in, “Me too.”

Del Toro said, “Let’s see that video.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah called them over, “We’ve got it downloaded so we can see it on the big screen.” They turned to the young men, thanked them, and gave them a strong warning about answering the phone quickly if they are needed in the future. Meek as sheep, they filed out of the interrogation room. Del Toro and his new partners made their way to a room full of
technicians. It looked under-utilized, but at the ready were two Indian technicians projecting the video on the computer’s largest screen. The video was dark and grainy, zoomed in and fidgety. The techs started by trying to locate the figure that had already jumped into the wadi. When the figure is located on the other side, running up the slopping embankment, the camera narrowed in and became very unsteady from that distance.

The detective said excitedly, “That’s got to be our UNSUB!”

Del Toro agreed, “I know a man hauling ass when I see one, and either that’s a man, or we need to sign her up for the Olympics.”

The officer said, “Set it back, set it back.” The night sounds of traffic and rustling from inside the car warbled in reverse and the video started again, “Look, he…she…just disappears, like the boys said, like she turned into salt, right here by the wall.”

Del Toro asked, “What does that mean, she turned into salt.”

“That’s just our expression of saying she disappeared into thin air.”

Khalifa Saeed, “Yeah, look the abaya is too dark to see at night from this distance.”

“But look here,” Del Toro went up to the monitor and pointed with his pencil, “All of a sudden this guy comes riding around the corner. You can’t see his face at all though. What time was this?”

Officer Mansour Abdullah checked his notepad, “Late, very late. Like three-thirty or four in the morning.”

“So, this guy is riding his bike at four in the fucking…excuse me…four in the fricken morning? I don’t buy it. That must be our guy right there,” he tapped the screen with this pointer, “You see, he must have crept around the villa right there where these bushes are, took off his disguise where his bike was hidden. Then he rides off.”
Detective Khalifa Saeed, “We’ve got to get over there and see if he left any evidence behind.”

“Better than that, “ Officer Mansour Abdullah said, “in this direction, he could be heading towards the main road, and there are cameras in that area. At least two of them.”

Del Toro became the most animated they had ever seen him, “Oh man, we got to go through this footage with a fine-tooth comb, get it cleaned up and enhanced if we can. This is a great lead. It goes along with the profile I presented.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah seemed entertained to see the lead detective and the visiting consultant so giddy and said, “Good hunting to you two.”

“Where are you going?” they both asked, taken aback.

“I think you guys are going to be looking for a ghost. You’re not going to find anything on those cameras. Anyway, I’m having Iftar at my house today. I have to go.”

Del Toro suggested, “If we get this footage on the news, we might get someone who can identify that bike.”

“I don’t know. You can tell it’s a bike, that’s about it. Too far away,” Mansour Abdullah countered. Del Toro looked to Khalifa Saeed for support.

“Okay, Ramadan Kareem. We’re going to have these guys enhance the video if they can, and see if the admin will let us make an announcement on the news. Del Toro and I will gather the forensic team that’s on duty and look for footprints, maybe even find the abaya if it’s still there in the bushes.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah turned instantly helpful again, “Do you want me to go by there on the way to my house to see if it’s worth sending a team over.”
Del Toro and Detective Khalifa Saeed looked at each skeptically, “We’ll be sending over a team anyway, but I guess you can take a look for yourself. Just mind the scene, don’t taint it, please.” Del Toro walked away shaking his head and chewing his cuticles.
Chapter 59

(Abu Dhabi Police Headquarters – Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

The next day, Del Toro and his taskforce partners are escorted into a boardroom with a massive, black marble table festooned with leather office chairs. There’s a posh, stately air about the room; the Emiratis already seated seem dismissive of their arrival, not even deigning to look in their direction yet motioning to the office boy to attend to them with coffee, karak tea, and dates, which he does. Del Toro accepts out of courtesy. At the head of the table is an empty seat, and soon after their arrival, Del Toro recognizes the Sheikh of Dubai from years of international news. The Sheikh is surrounded by imposing gentlemen in suits and other Emirati dignitaries in kanduras. Everyone in attendance rises to their feet and mumbles a deferential greeting, which Del Toro mimes in chorus one beat behind. The Sheikh speaks closely to one of the flippant gentlemen who so haughtily ignored their taskforce when they first sat down, and just as quickly the Sheikh exits from whence he came without ever taking the chair that had been left open for him. This high-ranking official then waves Del Toro over and asks him to sit in the head chair. The man introduces himself and Del Toro forgets his name instantly, knowing he’ll probably never see this guy again. He tells Del Toro, “Mr. Ramon, we have decided to take serious actions to capture this criminal.”

Del Toro is at a loss for words, “Ahhh, and what would those be?”

“Among some other drastic measures that trouble us greatly, we are organizing a large team to…visit people.”

“By visit, do you mean that you’re going to raid people’s homes without provocation or evidence?”

“We are simply going to visit everyone’s door, neighborhood-by-neighborhood and search for evidence inside people homes…among some other drastic measures…based on your offense range analysis. We’ve caught bank robbers this way within hours.”
“Yes, drastic measures. You keep saying that, but are you asking me if I think this is a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be, Mr. Ramon?”

“Well, I don’t think it is going to go over very well with human rights organizations.”

“At this point, we cannot concern ourselves with that. There is too much at risk right now.”

“I understand your feelings, but I don’t want you to think that your decision is somehow based on my profile or that I think this is a good idea because I don’t.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Ramon. You don’t have to be responsible for this decision, if that is your concern. It was made by the Sheikhs themselves. We just want your help in understanding what to look for when we go inside someone’s home.”

Del Toro takes a sip of his tea to stall for time, searching for words that might minimize the disaster of this societal experiment, “Once again, you do understand that this decision will probably cause a world-wide fervor.”

“Fervor?” the man says with a puzzled look.

“Yes, a world-wide outcry. A, ah, an…international incident. That will make the news, for sure.”

“It has already made the news, Mr. Ramon. Only now we’re the ones who are going to be making it, not him.” Del Toro is suddenly flanked by the imposing gentlemen who comprised half of the Sheikh’s entourage. They indicate for Del Toro to stand up then escort him into another room. Del Toro has never felt this nervous before in his life, wondering if that foreign prison he imagined has modernized along with the rest of the U.A.E. or if it looks like the Turkish hellhole depicted in the movie, Midnight Express. Before Del Toro moves in the direction they are taking
him, he stands still and says, “More importantly, you’re going to cause the suspect to flee…to run. You’ll never catch him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ramon, yes, you’ve expressed this issue before. However, if our actions make him leave our country, at the very least we will have succeeded in stopping him from killing our citizens.”

“But…”

“Thank you, Mr. Ramon. These gentlemen would like to get you started on creating a list of items we should be looking for. Good afternoon.” Del Toro is led out of the room, like a man who know he’s about to be hung with his own belt.
Chapter 60

(Abu Dhabi Police Headquarters – Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Last night, I had the thousand complexities of womenkind on my mind and none of them the good kind. My old dragon-lady boss started the parade and proved to me how low my lovely wife would stoop for me. Director Larissa Harrison got me on the phone and informed me, quite irritated, that my wife had reached out to her personally by striding into her office, baby on her hip at 9:00 a.m. in the morning. Wearing a look of determination that I would easily recognize in my wife as a mix between homespun grit and mama-bear-emerging-from-her-cave, but that my ex-boss could only condense into words as female hysterics, my wife demanded to know to whom in charge she had to speak that would understand her plight of being left abandoned at home with a baby. I pictured my beautiful, golden-lashed hellcat who crossed her arms in front of her bare, milk-laden breasts and scolded me before I left her for this skeptical payday less than a month ago. Director Harrison made the understatement that my wife wasn’t taking our separation very well and that she was ill with worry and bitterness. Apparently, my wife managed to make a threatening gesture without any overt reference to physical harm, while somehow convincing my ex-boss to, not only speak to the Emirati official who had run a background check on me, but to go so far as call the U.S. Embassy to speak to the Emirati government on her behalf. My ex-boss said that plane tickets for my family were expected shortly from my new sponsor, which was the least she could do, considering the emotional affair she had initiated and I took the fall for. Apparently, my wife thought so, too. Director Larissa Harrison bid me good luck the with case, leveled a threat of her own, telling me not to further invoke the F.B.I., and hung-up without a saying goodbye.

Next on my mind was my loyal plebeian wife, Amanda, whom I could not fault in her eternal pursuit of matrimonial bliss and cohesion, which I had set wobbling and limping down the path of our future years ago when I had to become a starving artist. As we depended on her for
quite a while, I was lucky it was in her nature to be motherly and accommodating, and that it was in her crooked bloodline to revere the sanctimony of wedding vows. Not one of her screwed-up, backwoods, family members could hang their head in the shame of divorce as far back as anyone could remember. As flawed as they may have been, they took pride in that at least. She rang me so close to the hang up with Larissa that I almost thought they were in the same room together, thousands of miles away, colluding this whole time to add yet another facet of misery to my experience here in the U.A.E. A man caught in a mid-life riptide.

   Nevertheless, my wife got hold of me on the phone before I could slough off my suit and tie, and, with a relish I hadn’t heard in her voice since she announced the strong, virile name she had picked out for our son, Cole Angel Del Toro, she jumped up and down telling me that she was coming to meet me in a few days at the U.A.E.’s expense. I knew she was jumping for joy because I could here her breathe pump from her mouth every time she landed and spoke at the same time. My eardrums were pierced. I smiled the unseen grin of a condemned man granted a temporary pardon, and explained to her that the killer was getting the better of me and the entire U.A.E. I explained that I would be persona non grata as the case lingered on and that she should hide from me when she got here the way a shepherd girl married to a werewolf locks herself in a cage every full-moon. She agreed to stay out of my way as long as she and Cole could be nearby and see me every day. I was relieved yet burdened. She would be the comfort of home yet feel so far away. She would give solace, yet magnify any future mistakes.

   Then, there was Brenda, who came to me when I finally sat down after a long day of sleep-deprivation and drifted unexpectedly to a nap. Coincidentally, this was right before my ex-mistress and my wife could wake me up with their respective phone calls. Brenda came to me in a coffin, and when she woke up, she was wearing her cheerleading outfit from Socorro High School. She
rose up out of her sleek, satin-lined casket, eighteen-years-old, as lovely and pristine as I remembered her, demanding to know why she was dead. In the dream, I tried to explain that she was where she needed to be. That her lot in my life was to finally be dead to me. That it was time. That I had put her there in that coffin so that she could stop occupying the attic in my skull. But she argued that she didn’t want to be dead and that I should climb in the tomb myself if I wanted to be rid of her. For the split second I had before I was awakened by Director Harrison’s call, the pang of her lingering smell and the color of her hazel, feline eyes hurt me as they had a million times over.

Of course, there were the deceased women who had become my ward, the women who should have been first in my mind but instead found themselves deluged in the insistency of the living they had left behind, the ones who had their daily lives to lead while they could no longer live theirs. I lined them up in my thoughts as they came to me, the woman who’s essence stilled stained the rocks beneath a mountain’s shadow, the Slavic lady whose body, once cleaned, seemed to shimmer with diamonds until they were plucked out of her skin and exposed as bit of alley glass, the one who emptied an entire floor of all trace of life and habitation like an atom bomb, the girl who’s silent scream fed a falcon, the lady whose teeth and cheeks, hair and skin though dried and cracked as ancient parchment, disclosed her Ethiopian heritage with the bone structure of her skull, the other local girl whose desecration set the natives here on fire, the sister of the little Emirati tough who will forever feel responsible for her absence, the America beauty stolen right off the streets as if no more than a prized poodle, and countless others yet to be found and pulled from beneath the crest of a waterless ocean.
Last was the female djinn in woman’s clothing, donkey feet and knives for hands, eyes etched in coal-black mascara, beauty hidden underneath the folds of a gown and veil, or perhaps not there at all, an illusion, a simple con, the great bait-and-switch, as demons often do.

I made the conscious decision not to think about any of them anymore. I clicked on the television, hoping the white-noise of indecipherable T.V. dialogue, but the channel defaulted on the news. It was inescapable, so why not tune in. The American reporter on the screen was on location at the largest mall in the world, located adjacent to the most recognizable building in the country, the Burj Khalifa. The reporter slowly ambled through the empty mall, microphone in hand, reporting, “In a shocking development, the theocratic government of the United Arab Emirates has sent shock waves throughout the Islamic world by banning all facial coverings and accessories, despite outcries of sacrilege and blasphemy from their most influential allies on the world stage – Saudi Arabia – along with other heads of states in the Gulf Council Community. While other nations, most recently France, have banned facial coverings under the justification that criminals had taken advantage of them to allude detection, many pundits claim these predominantly-Christian nations have implemented these rules as thinly veiled enforcement of systemic Islamophobia. Now, it seems that the ruling sheikhs of the U.A.E. have borrowed from the playbook they so vehemently condemned in other countries just a few years prior by mandating, effective immediately, that every citizen’s face, regardless of religion or gender, shall be visible in attempt to combat the latest scourge of globalization to rock the oil giant – an unprecedented crime spree in their midst. Not just any crime spree, but a series of murders that the U.A.E. government was unwilling to acknowledge until more evidence could be gathered.

Speaking to a psychology professor from New York University Abu Dhabi, we asked Dr. Strickland why this particular crime wave would elicit such a drastic response from the governing
body and this is what he had to say, ‘A serial killer on the loose is a very unusual and particularly nefarious kind of perpetrator in that he preys on complete strangers for selfish, hedonist reasons, or for no reason at all. Most citizens in a civilized world cannot comprehend this kind of behavior other than to consider it evil. Pure evil. Therefore, it takes a different set of tactics to capture a criminal like this. The U.A.E. has proven before that it is willing to break conformity to make a large impact in the world, and banning religious garb in a country founded on religion is just another example.’”

Apparently, I had not killed Brenda off in my dream because in mid-concentration, there I was, talking to her again, “Holy shit, Bren, can you believe it? That’s what the little bootlicker meant by among some other drastic measures. Shhh, shh, let’s hear the rest of this.”

The breaking news continued, “In a statement issued by the seven ruling sheikhs that went out across the nation through their state-subsidized telecommunication companies, Du and Etisalat, this message was sent to all subscribers: Due to a ruthless murderer targeting our citizens, we call upon the loyal people of our community, residents and visitors, to put their modesty aside and remove their facial coverings to aid us in keeping everyone safe and in capturing the unknown predator who walks among us in disguise.’

The special bulletin cut to an Arab woman at the mall being interviewed and overdubbed in English, “I think this is a horrible decision and goes against everything we stand for.”

Another young female in a headscarf who appeared to be a student said in English, “I understand where they’re coming from, but I think it is going to cause serious tension and resentment among the people, especially among the older, more traditional men and women. I also think the more conservative Arab nations will really see it as an insult.”
As soon as I heard the reporter say, “The unprecedented move,” I prayed to the little angel on my shoulder, “Oh no, Bren, please no, don’t let them mention me, don’t let them mention me, Brenda!”

And they mentioned me, “…comes on the heels of a private investigative consultant endorsed by the F.B.I. who has been assisting the U.A.E. on the first sexual sadist serial killer the country has ever encountered…or at least acknowledged.”

I shouted, “Motherfuckers! They had to mention us, didn’t they? I’m not even an agent, you bastards! Why don’t they just broadcast our whole playbook over the airwaves!” I clicked off the news and threw the remote into the poof of my pillow. I un-strangled myself from my tie, crumpled it into a ball, and fast-pitched a strike right into the monitor. I threw a mean yoki-geri kick into the guts of the couch as my phone rang again.

I said, “Oh no, not fucking now. Not right now.” I ignored the call, put the settings on vibrate, poured my nakedness into my swimming trunks one appendage at a time, grabbed some light reading called *Djinn, Shaitan, and Other Mythical Creatures in the Islamic Tradition*, a book provided by the NYUAD library, and made my way to the pool.
Chapter 61

Del Toro reads the origin story of the *djinn, Umm Duwaís*, Appendix 7.
Chapter 62

(Poolside – Fairmont Hotel, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

By the time Alan Barret arrived, Del Toro was treading water within reaching distance of his cocktail, and his aviator sunglasses were a good incentive to keep his head above water. When Alan squatted by the poolside, completely overdressed, Del Toro was too busy keeping afloat to acknowledge him. Alan finally broke the ice, sounding like a desperate high school sweetheart, “Where have you been? I’ve been calling and calling you, man!” Del Toro concentrated on his breathing.

Alan finally sat criss-cross-apple-sauce with a newspaper in his hand, “Can you believe this shit? Saudi Arabia is going mental. They are rioting in the streets over there over this. They’re threatening to break all diplomatic ties with the U.AE. It’s insane!”

“And guess who they’re going to blame for that.”

“You don’t have your phone on? There are probably a thousand people trying to get a hold of you right now. Your wife is probably calling you, too, worried sick. This has become an international incident!”

“Oh, but I do have my phone on you, good sir. I’m just choosing to ignore it. It is a harbinger of bad news and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Yeah, but surely your wife…”

“Ah, she’ll be here in person soon. She can live another day without hearing my voice.”

“Oh really? So, they’re letting your wife come over, too?”

“Not really. My wife kind of forced her way here by throwing a fit in front of my ex-boss and crying to the big wigs over here, and they caved in.”

When Alan asked, “The boss you were involved in that scandal with?” quite nonchalantly, it felt like the pool had just turned to ice. Del Toro didn’t understand how Alan knew this. Had
he mentioned it during one of their drunken nights? Whatever the case, it was quite bold of Alan to mention. Like he was trying to get a rise out of him. Del Toro looked so stunned and embarrassed, Alan finally said, “Well, you were relieved of duty on an important case, and though whatever happened to you didn’t make it into the newspapers at the time, it almost did. There were rumors floating around you and her both, but no journalist could ever get a confirmation, so you’re lucky. The story died on the vine.”

All Del Toro could say was, “Hmm, I have no comment on that.”

Realizing he had pushed a little too far, Alan quickly changed the subject, “If you find yourself too busy or something and you need me to pick up your family at the airport, I can help you out.”

“I may need to take you up on that. Anyway, she and I may be on the rocks, and we just don’t know it yet. So, we’re going to have to have a big conversation when she gets here.”

“That ain’t the only thing on the rock,” Alan summoned over the waiter, “Two more of those, please. Thank you,” then he turned to Del Toro, “On the rocks? You told me that you just had a baby…a baby girl, right?”

“Wrong. Baby boy. His name’s Cole.”

“So, how can you be on the rocks?”

“Because Brenda keeps giving me bad advice, that’s why.”

“Brenda? Is that her name? The F.B.I. Director? I thought it was something else.”

“Naw, Brenda is my…scapegoat. She’s the…bane of my existence. She’s a little twenty-two-year-old beauty queen, too, too good for me…at least that’s what she used to be the last time I saw her.”

“Some piece of tail you were banging that got you in trouble?”
“She’s…she’s…Aw, you wouldn’t understand…just forget it.”

“No, no, tell me. Really.”

“She…she…created me. She made me the fucked-up person I am today, and I can’t get rid of her.”

“I’m not following.”

“I used to love her. Really loved her, loved her so much it was unhealthy. But she was just…too good for me. I wasn’t in her league.”

“Jesus, Del Toro, you’re like a cross between a Greek god and Dirty Harry compared to me. The fuck are you talking about, not in her league? What, was she a super model?”

“Whatever. I just…grew up with this girl from the time we were in grade school, and I was in love with her all those years. When we finally started dating, she was my best friend, and I thought we would always be together. Like even if we weren’t together, together, we’d always stay together, as friends at least because we knew each other so well.”

“But she died or what?”

“Ha! I wish she had died. It would have been easier if she had died, but no. She dumped me, and even though I eventually got over her, I never really did, I guess. Did I? Instead, I got revenge. I took it out on every woman I ever met.”

“Like how?”

“Like, I used them. I wanted to prove to her, prove to myself that she was a fool, that women loved me, women wanted to be with me. So, I ran through them, just like this guy. Just like this killer. I did the same thing he’s doing.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t kill anybody, Del Toro.”
“I used them and broke their hearts and went on to the next one...like a conqueror. That’s what it was, a conquest.”

“So how the hell did you end up getting married?”

“It was a conscious decision to slow down, to settle down...to...to settle and get right, do the right thing, get right with myself. And believe me, I love her. I love my wife to death, but this girl...this girl Brenda, she haunts me. Whenever I think or plan anything, I imagine what she would do in the situation. What would she think, what would she say, what would she decide?”

“ Fucking weird. Why?”

“I don’t fucking know why. I guess because Brenda was smart, super smart. Smarter than me. Beat me in everything. It was almost like a competition growing up with her.”

“Wow. So why didn’t you just try to get back together with her if you loved her so much?”

“No, no. That’s what I mean. You don’t understand. I don’t even love Brenda anymore. I don’t even fucking know her anymore. I haven’t seen her in close to 15 years. She’s married with a kid is all I know. We could never be together, and it’s not what I want. I don’t long for her. I just have dreams of her over and over again. Dreams of her leaving. So, I wish she had died. I wish she would die in my head. Ha! Whenever I make a bad decision, I know that I ran it by her first...in my head, so I can blame her for it if it goes wrong. Is that stupid or what?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty stupid. You need to just get her out of your head.”

“I told you that I understood this guy, this killer...that I was more like him than I ever cared to be. Well this is what I meant. He has a fixation that he can’t get over, too, and I get it. I get that because I have it, too. I have it, too, so I know it’s real. It’s a real thing that can happen.”

“Naw, no way, not at all. You’re nothing like this guy. You’re just a little damaged like the rest of us. We all are, aren’t we?”
“ Apparently not. Most people seem to have it together better than me, and I’m supposed to be this great expert on the mind. ”

“ Then, I don’t get what this big conversation you’re going to have with your wife is going to be about? You want a divorce? ”

“ No, no. I would never do that. I suppose I need to try to explain to my wife why I’m so fucked up, why I might need some kind of counseling myself, which she’s really going to love because if I go in for counseling, my ability to make money, write books, run the household. All that gets called into question. ”

“ Wouldn’t she understand if you need a little marriage counseling? ”

“ I’m afraid of what I’d have to say in front of a marriage counselor. I’m afraid I might have deeper psychological issues. ”

“ Ah, ’ I see. Not so good in your line of work as an expert. ”

“ Exactly. Anyway, Alan, what about you? Why haven’t you married yet? Settled down? I’ll introduce you to my wife’s sister when you come back to the States. ”

Alan gave Del Toro a sly grin, “ Who’s to say I’ve never married? ” but before Del Toro could transform his shocked face into words, Alan said, “ Anyway, that would be fantastic, Del Toro, really, but I don’t plan on going back to America for a while. But, you know what, I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be sticking around here, either. Especially the way things are going now. This whole thing just keeps getting more and more bizarre. ”

“ Oh yeah? Wait till you see what they got in store for the likes of you next! ”

“ Likes of me? What do you mean? ”

“ You didn’t think they’d just inconvenience their own people, did you? ”

“ What are they going to do, Del Toro? ”
Del Tor emerged out of the pool onto his elbows and grabbed Alan by the shoulder almost pulling him in, “You didn’t hear this from me, Alan, you got me?

“Yeah, yeah, I got you. Off the record.”

“Strictly off the record!” Alan crossed his heart, and Del Toro whispered in his ear, “Let’s just say, the only probable cause they need to bust down your door is your little, lily-white face.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“Means that if you’re Western in this country, you’re fair game for search and seizure.”

“Like straight up stop-and-search?”

Del Toro scoffed, “More like bust-down-your-front-door-and-search.”

Alan got up looking extremely nervous, “Hey, listen buddy, I’d join you for another one, but I got to get going.”

“So fast? Got a hot date?”

“No, no, I got some writing to do.”

“Remember, Alan, strictly off the record. Keep my name out of it.”

Alan strode away, and when he had almost reached the pool gate, he turned around and yelled, “Better go answer that phone, man!”
Chapter 63

(Room 402 – Fairmont Hotel, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Have you ever been afraid of your phone? Like the end of the world has been announced, and you’re not responsible if you haven’t seen it but completely responsible once you have? When you finally look because it’s a compulsion, because like a reflex your hand reaches into your pocket to pull it out, because if you don’t, someone literally might have died, you see that you’ve only missed ten calls and twenty-five messages. Not bad, you think. Could have been a hundred. So, you ask that voice in your head you speak to when you’re by yourself who you should start with. In your case, the voice is Brenda. You ask if you should start with your wife? Perhaps the ex-boss?

Yeah, you think, better start with her.

You make the call in a state of gut-roiling dread, “Hey babe,” you say, and that’s when you can’t remember if you actually dialed your ex-boss or your wife. You only realize you misdialed when Larissa says, “I thought we were supposed to stop with all that kind of talk?”

You try to catch up. Get your head out of your ass! you scold yourself, “Oh, my…Geez, I was calling my wife, and I must have hit the wrong…I’m so sorry Director Harrison. I was going to call you after her, and I just…I didn’t mean to call you…”

You’re lucky she says, “It’s okay, Del Toro. It’s okay, but I do have to admit that I got a little excited all over again, against my will, of course…against my better judgement. That’s how we got ourselves into hot water last time, isn’t it?”

You’re an idiot, a complete moron, you’re nothing but a bag of slip-ups. How have you made it alive this far? You just finished closing this door to open another, and now you’ve found yourself in the same old predicament. So, you have to grovel, “I’m sorry about that. No, no, I’ve learned my lesson. Strictly business that I called you.”
You hear a pause on the other end of the line that might as well be an abyss of wonder. You hope she’s disappointed, but she may be mad; she may be filled with disgust and marvel at how Spic from the border like you ever crossed her royal Ivy League path. She treats you with kid gloves, and you wonder if that’s because she cares for you or she thinks one wrong move will shatter you like a sunbaked robin’s egg, put you on suicide watch again. Finally, you hear her say, “Anyway, glad you’re checking in because you seemed to have caused quite a stir over there.”

You say, “A stir? Is that what you’d call it?| She would never candy coat it for you, “No, I’d say it’s more like a clusterfuck.”

“That’s about right,” you agree.

But by some miracle she still has your back, “Look, they didn’t called us in like they should have; instead, they turned to you. You gave your assessment, and now they have to deal with it as they see fit. It’s not our problem.” You’re astounded at how any society can get to this point. Where it can be so far removed from other people’s pain that the mutilation of someone’s mother, someone’s daughter is simply considered someone else’s problem, but you pretend to feel the same way, “Yes, ma’am. Not our problem.”

“However, that’s not all. I got the court order back…”, you had almost forgotten about that, “Remember? To open that juvenile file for Alan Barret? And you may have been on to something there.” Your knees almost buckle.

“What you mean,” you say, “I’ve changed directions since then.”

“This guy does have quite an extensive juvenile record. All the way up until he becomes an adult, and then he doesn’t have anything worse than a few parking tickets once he hits eighteen.”

“What’s in the file?”
“Let’s see, there a grab bag here – bedwetting and fire-starting. At an orphanage, no less. Shoplifting, vandalism, destruction of property, that’s from the middle school he attended, an alternative institution. A few admittances to mental facilities for suicidal ideations. You name it, he’s got it. Pretty screwed up kid, but, something happened to him. Somehow, he got his crap together as an adult I guess. I don’t see any military or anything like that, so I don’t know what it was that helped him out.”

You’re dumbfounded. You realize that this is how it works on other people. You just thought you could never be fooled. You manage to sound calm when you say, “Thanks for the update, Director Harrison. I’ve really got to call my wife, if that’s all you got. And once again, I really appreciate that you backed me on this”

It’s not possible. Your profiled an UNSUB who might try to inject himself into the case, which he has, but he’s been so helpful, you let it fool you. He has become a friend! You actually like him! It’s impossible, you tell yourself. He’s never been cloying or fishing for information. But of course, he was the information! You’ve been with him on the nights of two of the most recent incidents, which really sold you off the idea. It couldn’t be him; logistically speaking, he couldn’t have been at those crime scenes quick enough. Could he?
(Villa somewhere in the U.A.E.)

I’ve been granted a new, crown of legitimacy. The “Alleyman.” I like it. It has an ominous ring to it.

Hindsight is a splendorous kaleidoscope, how all my splintered pieces came together to create such a vision - my fortress, my kingdom, my domain. Every time I walk through its enclosure, I feel like a king, like royalty. I’m a warlord who took what I wanted, conquered and laid siege, a nobleman, like Vlad the Impaler, Elizabet Bathory, Gilles De Ras, Liu Pengli, La Quintrala, Ahaya the Cowkeeper, and H.H. Holmes. We were a bane, but surely, we all came to similar terms with ourselves.

Like a modern drawbridge coming down, I use a remote control on my keychain to open a pair of large metal gates through which I drive in my car, and immediately I’m nestled in the privacy of the eight-foot walls of my villa. The entire courtyard is not that large, maybe half an acre. Most of it is paved in brick as is usual here; however, I have a small area where I removed the bricks and laid down sod to form a lush garden of subjects. I planted Damas trees above their heads to honor them. They are a hearty tree, green and resistant to heat and drought. I admire their fortitude and will to survive. Their roots reach deep through the substrate to taste the slightest trace of moisture. I imagine my trees feasting on these, my early conquests beneath my feet. I picture their bones tangled in their fibrous filaments. I walk over them every day, look down at the base of the trunks and remember how pretty they were. I have an automatic watering system, but sometimes I use the hose to water them by hand, knowing the liquid ebbs into their skulls. If the feeling takes me, I piss there, too, like a dog reminding no one in particular that this is mine. Only five trees could fit here.
I continue towards the back wall of my courtyard, which give me the most pride. I built the most unassuming tool shed out of wood with aluminum panels. Attached to it are four steep steps with the fifth being the roof of the shed on which I can stand and overlook the wadi that runs through my neighborhood. On the outside of my courtyard wall are some paving bricks piled up by which I can and scramble over the top and jump into my property in a flash. The shed is a cute distraction. Below it lies the heart of my real work.

It didn’t take too much effort, mostly it required time. At one point, the landlord wanted to add properties next to mine, and the new tenants didn’t want to be bothered with encountering me, so the landlord removed my gate, blocked it off, and reinstalled it in the rear of the villa, which worked out better for me. Now, there was a little road where I entered into my villa through the back along the wadi. That allowed me more privacy and made my work even less conspicuous.

I got the idea when I removed the paving bricks to lay the sod. I expanded the area of bricks I removed, and excavated an enormous hole, wheelbarrow-full at a time, all through the nights when only that kind of backbreaking work can be done in the desert. I merely filled the wheelbarrow, took it a few meters out of my gate and dumped it into the sand out along the little road, eventually making a pleasing mound that stretched the entire length of the driveway.

As soon as I started to square of the corners of the hole, I went to the industrial distract that looks like the streets of Karachi or Mumbai. There, the city has sequestered all the unsightly blue-collar laborers and their cramped shops into a maze of narrow, traffic-filled streets where anything can be fixed or constructed by hand for a steal. I drew a stabilizing frame, wrote the dimension, and included where I wanted holes to be drilled for bolts, and said I’d be back in a week. I posted the iron frame inside the hole that was now forming into a room, and clad it on all sides with the same aluminum sheets I used to cover my shed. Then I filled in the sand I had mounded by my
driveway entrance and covered around and on top of my shelter. The ceiling was low, but it was cool and spacious enough to carry out anything I needed to do undisturbed. On top, I re-laid the brick in tight masonry that matched seamlessly with the surrounding courtyard floor. With the steel frame I posted, I could jump up and down on it from above and feel no difference between the hollowed room beneath my feet and the solid ground right next to it. All the bricks felt and appeared to be one and the same.

The most difficult part and least impressive was the entrance hatch. I cemented paving bricks together so that they could be pulled up with two handles that latch into hidden steel holes I implanted in the hatch. Then I could lift of the entire piece. However, it is absurdly heavy, and I take no bride in its crude construction although it does the job of being completely unnoticeable from the rest of the bricks. Really, it just goes to prove that there is always room for improvement, and perhaps I will come up with a less cumbersome alternative in the near future if circumstances allow.

Here, like the dungeon of every castle, my will plays out as I see fit, and no one can deter me. I have taken my subjects down there to worship and indulge me. I have tested the veracity of my construction against the backdrop of their screams. Even if they are left ungagged, you might be able to discern a slight muffled sound coming from somewhere. It’s baffles the mind to locate where it’s coming from. Could be anything, the sound is so faint – a cat being skinned, a wife being beaten, a child breaking a bone, but eventually a truck rumbles by and the faint mewing goes away.

Of course, I built my rustic toolshed with its few steps over the brick manhole into my hidden lair, and should anyone come across it, they’d be no wiser to what lies beneath. The entire abode, my villa and what I’ve added on, is the prefect representation of my own façade. I cherish
it and would hate to have to leave it behind. I wonder if I had to, should I bother digging up the bones of my garden and filling in my bloody chamber. I don’t think so. I can’t imagine any of it would be discovered even if investigators walked right over it. In fact, that is its intended purpose.

My wife doesn’t know it exists. I did all this work over a summer she spent abroad with her family. They were long, hot sweaty nights, and at one point, I thought of bringing in some hired-hands to help me finish before she returned, but I managed to complete it myself. I was relieved that no one else, other than my subjects, would ever lay eyes on it. Anyone that does would have to be dealt with, which would be fun and has its own merits, but it is certainly a burden.

Now that I see the investigation is ramping up, I have to make some difficult decisions. Just in case, I will take some precautions by getting rid of some of treasures. It’ll pain me, but I have to start somewhere. After I walk the inside perimeter of the villa I’ve rented for the last several years, I go around again. My wife is at our other apartment where she works during the week in Dubai, and I never transform when she is around. Although our schedules allow me plenty of time to be myself, she is coming here this weekend, so I will have to tidy up.

I walk over my pretty memories beneath the trees. I climb up the four steps and assess the weather. There is a hot breeze, a few clouds, but nothing promising like a storm. I descend the steep steps and open the shed. I kneel down and remove two loose bricks, revealing the iron loops. From my toolshed wall, I remove two hooks with a handle, like the kind stabbed into blocks of ice to slide them around in the old days, only these hooks are much smaller. I hook the loops with them, and pull up the cement pattern of bricks. It is extremely heavy and cumbersome. I gently place it beside the manhole so as not to crack the bricks. There is a steel hatch with a spring-triggered latch that locks closed again when shut. The hatch opens upward.
An unholy stench billows out from the dark hole. I try to keep it clean, but every body fluid imaginable has soiled the floor, so it has taken on a slaughterhouse quality I eventually get used to every time I go down. From the inside, there is a hidden trigger that releases the latch to exit from the hole which I carefully hide from my guests, should they ever escape their bindings. I climb down the steel-rung ladder with a duffel bag in hand. When I bring my quarry home, I simply dangle them over the open manhole and drop them in. The fall is an added indignity but doesn’t ruin them. Depending on how they land, it takes them by surprise or knocks the wind out of them at most.

Down below it’s spartan. I didn’t think to fill it with items I might need before I enclosed it, so I had to construct the shelves, table, and chair down here one piece at a time. On my shelves, I have a menagerie of mementos – barrettes, I.D.s, high heels, purses, wallets, necklaces, panties, bras, shirts, shorts, pantyhose, locks of hair, tattooed pieces of skin in separate jars, and finally my prized possession. With each item I put in the duffel bag, I picture them again. Their beautiful, haughty faces made hideous with flinching, tear-streaked terror and hopelessness. I open the barrettes, and it takes me back to the smell of shampoo from their hair or the heady aroma of oil that exudes from their skin when filled with adrenaline. I drop the items into the bag. I finger the locks of hair, each a different fineness and texture, some light, thin, blonde, some dark, course, brunette, others black cotton balls like rabbit tails. I drop them into the bag. The shoes let me relive the streets from which they came. I remember their cadences as they walked by without a care. I drop them in the bag with sadness. The undergarments take me to the inception of intimacy I forced upon them, when they are stripped of their modesty, and shiver there in fear, near naked. They are the last bits of fabric protecting them from me before I take it all, all away. I drop them into the bag in anger.
Finally, my jars. My precious jars. Each one, a spaghetti jar with a tightly sealed, twist-on lid. They’re the best at keeping the contents inside from leaking. Floating inside are the very windows to their souls. In the modern day, there are different grades of formaldehyde that are not easy to come by. It took months of research, breaking and entering, and stealing from hospitals and universities, which are fairly lax around here with a set of scrubs, a lab coat, or the flash of an I.D. badge. The best preservatives remain clear as water without turning green, cloudy or viscous-looking, so my specimens float there in the jars, two orbs each. Fury pulsates through my veins as I place them in the bottom of the bag. Fifteen jars in all make for a heavy load. I’ve rigged a hook-and-pulley above the manhole for getting the bodies out when I would take them inside the house and clean them in the bathtub as a final farewell, but today it comes in handy for removing the overloaded duffel bag.

Before I go, I turn to Maitha Saeed cringing in the corner, and the urge to abuse her makes me tumescent. I never ask for their names, but sometimes their I.D. cards are with their belongings, but in this case, she was reported in the newspapers, unlike many of the others. She is shivering and moaning, but I don’t have time for her adoration today. I stoop by her and she flinches, quailing smaller into a ball of herself. She may be the last of her kind for long time if I decide to leave, and this thought fills me with an emptiness that will torture me until I can secure a new location. I slap her face and leave here there, screaming herself hoarse through the gag.

I hoist the duffel bag then myself out of the manhole, and I place it in the passenger seat next to me. I drive all the way to Dubai, and zigzag through neighborhoods disposing of different items in trashcan heaped with garbage. Then, just before the sun comes up, I drive out into the desert to one of the locations where they haven’t found my other bodies yet, and I pour out each jar into a series of small holes I make in the ground for every pair of eyes. I grow emotional and
start to tear up. To feel better, I pleasure myself over my favorite pair looking up at me from the ground. When I finish, I cover them over with a handful of sand, and walk away, dissatisfied. Nothing is ever enough.
Chapter 65

(National Taxi – Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

Every time the taxi goes over 120 kilometers per hour, an automated voice that sounds something between a digitized Chinese or Indian woman says, “Please, slow down, you are going over the speed limit. Please, slow down, you are going over the speed limit.”

Del Toro is driving through Abu Dhabi towards the police headquarters, but the taxi is going too slow for his taste, “Sir, I’m sorry, but let’s go, please! Let’s go! We need to get there as fast as possible.”

The Pakistani driver sheepishly says in a thick accent, “I’m sorry, sir, but I cannot go over speed limit, or I will be fined by my company.”

“How much could the fine be? I’ll pay it.”

“No, sir, I cannot. I get fine every time pass speed camera, and there are too many, too many. Then, I lose my job. I go fast as possible.”

Del Toro tries to relax and resigns himself to the impossibility of getting there any sooner, so he watches the latest report from CNN on his phone. The same news broadcaster that reported the last story is live on location, “In another bold move, the U.A.E. government has doubled down on their Draconian tactics to capture the serial killer the media has dubbed the Alleyman. Recently, CNN broke the story that the U.A.E. banned all facial coverings including those worn by local residents for religious purposes in adherence with Sharia Law. Now, shocking footage has been released on social media platforms of expatriates having their homes raided and searched in an increased effort to identify and capture the homicidal maniac terrorizing the country.”

Del Toro notices from the video footage that the reporter is standing in a residential alleyway. It’s day time, and he recognizes it immediately as one of the crime scenes.
The report continues, “It is believed that the perpetrator-at-large makes his way through dirt alleyways, like this one, which run between the palatial villas populating these quiet, upscale communities here in the U.A.E where similar murders and suspected kidnappings have taken place in and around the three largest cities of a country the size of Ohio with the population of roughly half of New York City. These alleyways are not so menacing in the day time, but as you see, they make for an easy means of clandestine travel between neighborhoods. Thus, the killer’s new moniker, the Alleyman, is frighteningly apt.”

A montage of small riots and violent outbreaks of protesters denouncing the U.A.E. for breaking Islamic traditions fills the screen as the reporter continues, “After the Islamic state banned one of the most prominent symbols of their religious beliefs, the U.A.E. was unanimously condemned by the entire Middle Eastern community. Meanwhile, a mass exodus of foreigners can be seen lining up at the airports.”

Footage of Westerners forming long lines at the Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports are spliced with interviews as the story continues, “We spoke to one man who has expressed his concerns,” the man being interviewed has an American accent, “I made the decision to leave my job here in the U.A.E. because I can’t risk being arrested or detained without cause. Besides, who knows how safe my wife is now with this killer striking all over the U.A.E. The last kidnapping took place just down the street from our house.”

The reporting continues, “The killer has struck in the cities of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Al Ain, prompting roadblocks to be put up…”

The taxi finally arrives at the headquarters, and Del Toro turns off the news as Detective Khalifa Saeed meets him in the parking lot, “We think we’ve found something.”
“That’s great. I may have something for you, too, but let’s take a look at what you got first. What is it?”

“It’s video; we’re getting it cued up right now. It’ll take a minute.” When Del Toro walks into the technology lab, the computer technicians are isolating images from the speed cameras placed along the city’s main thoroughfares.

Detective Khalifa Saeed sees a dull, tired light in Del Toro’s eyes and tries to cheer him up, “It’s a good thing you don’t live here; otherwise, we might be knocking on your door and letting ourselves in.”

Del Toro lends a half-hearted chuckle to humor the detective, “Sounds ridiculous, but I’ve met a few Americans here who wouldn’t find it so funny.”

“Mr. Del Toro, I know that it may seem unnecessary and unfair, but we are not kicking in doors and pointing machine guns at children.”

Officer Mansour Abdullah, who must have overheard the conversation as he walked in adds, “We are doing a thorough search of people matching your profile.”

Del Toro says, “That’s what has me concerned. If I had known my profile was going to get everyone’s human rights trampled on, then I wouldn’t…”

“You wouldn’t have what?” Mansour Abdullah dares, “You wouldn’t have played detective?”

“I don’t know if I would have been willing to provide assistance if…if…whatever, I’m here now, so let’s see what we’ve got to work with.” Everyone seems relieved by Del Toro’s quick change of direction. The computer techs slide over so the three taskforce leaders can watch the large computer screens.
One of the Indian technicians says, “We took the video of the boy’s phone and enhanced it as much as we could.”

“Guys, it still looks as grainy as Bigfoot footage from 1967. All you can tell is that Umm Duwais or whatever you call her runs away and that some guy suddenly rides by with a bike. We can’t even be sure that it’s the same person after the enhancement.”

“Then, sir, we triangulated the area where this footage was filmed, searching all the cameras the bike-rider may have passed that night.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed asks anxiously, “What did you find?”

“Yeah,“ adds Del Toro just as eagerly, “anything pan out?”

“We found a few people on bikes,” they zoom into paused images of people on bicycles, “but you can tell that they are not the same bike nor the same figure seen in the original video.”

“You’re right. Different colored bikes, different clothes.”

The second computer technician says animatedly, “But we finally found one here. Look.” He points to a frozen, blurry image on the screen, and the men gather around closely.

Mansour Abdullah says, “Where? I don’t see anything.”

“Right here. Set it back, Mr. Amol. There you see.”

Del Toro slaps his forehead, “There? The fuck guys? We could probably get better images from satellites orbiting the earth!”

“Yes, yes, yes, we understand, but we can clearly see that this bike rider is wearing the same dark clothes with a bag of some sort on his back.” The other technician continues, “And we can determine with some certainty that the bike is the same, too. Same color, same style even though it is a very small image.”

Detective Khalifa Saeed says, “We can barely…”
“See jackshit, boys!” Del Toro finishes his thought.

Mansour Abdulla gives up, “I think we got nothing. There nothing there. This is all meaningless. It’s a waste of time.” He gets up to leave, saying, “It’s been a long day, and I’m…I’m feeling defeated with this whole thing. I got to get some rest. I’m not feeling very well.” Before the others can even try to convince him to stay, Mansour Abdullah has waved his goodbyes and exits the tech room.

“Sir, once again, please take a moment. Please, sit down. We triangulated this area next, and there is another speed camera here.” The other technician clicks on a map of the city, and focuses on one group of city blocks, and continues, “There is a traffic-light camera here, a security camera at this school right here, and another CCTV on the corner of this business, and yet another one here.”

The other technician explains, “So there is only one small neighborhood this bike rider could have gone into without hitting any of those other cameras, which he didn’t. We pulled that footage and checked them all.”

His partner continues, “Even if he had discarded the bike and walked or jumped walls, we would have surely seen a person walking on those cameras, but at that time of night only a few people were out, and we followed them in and out of sight of the camera. They’re not our guy, but since our guy doesn’t appear at all, there is only one small neighborhood he could have gone into, and that’s here.” The area the technician points to is a relatively large neighborhood, and Del Toro groans.

Taking his meaning, the tech adds, “This neighborhood is maybe five square kilometers. It is a perfect rectangle, as you can see. It begins here and ends here. A total of six inlets and
outlets. Fortunately, much of the neighborhood is cut off by a wadi.” The tech points them all out on the map on the screen.

The other tech points out, “This neighborhood is known to have a very large expatriate community living there.” He circles a square compound labeled, The Village, in the center of the neighborhood, “So, if you guys still want to kick down doors…”

“We’re not kicking down doors!” Detective Khalifa Saeed says, exasperatedly, “We’re knocking first.”

“You should at least start with this neighborhood right here,” the computer techs say in unison.

“I think I recognize this Village, and I got my door-kicking boots on right now,” says Del Toro.

“We’re not kicking down doors.”

“I know, I know. We’re knocking first.”
Chapter 66

(Al Twam Neighborhood – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

As Del Toro and Detective Khalifa Saeed speed their way back to the city of Al Ain, they make the hour drive in forty-five minutes in a blue-and-white police SUV. When they arrive at the outskirts of town, a convoy of police vehicles await them. On the drive, they were able to coordinate a plan. Knowing each egress of the neighborhood, police vehicles with their lights spinning split off at the corner intersections of the neighborhood and drive to their designated post where they screech to a halt and immediately set up barriers blocking all traffic from going in or out of the entire neighborhood.

Del Toro turns to Detective Khalifa Saeed with a stern face, and stabs the map with his finger, “A team can hit other houses, but we’re going here first.”

“Yes, I remember. One, the killer goes away from his comfort zone, or away from his home to stalk victims, and with the other theory, he hunts within a radius around his comfort zone, subconsciously.”

“Right, well in this case, I think he may have gone out of his comfort zone when he killed in Abu Dhabi or Dubai, but I think he’s within his comfort zone when he took victims here in Al Ain.” In Arabic, Detective Khalifa Saeed instructs different team members to make a sweeping
search at different areas of the neighborhood while instructing a team to follow them to Villa 92. Once outside Alan Barret’s residence, Del Toro says, “I’m going to distance myself when you guys go in. Then when you bring him out, I will try to cool him down.”

The gate to Alan’s villa is closed and locked, but they don’t bother knocking. The tactical team quickly sets up a ladder and deftly makes it over the wall in silence. The entire team follows. Once inside the courtyard, Del Toro doesn’t notice anything out of the ordinary except for a very strange statue of Pygmalion half carved out of a block of marble on Alan’s front porch. It looks like it cost a fortune and seems out of place at such a humble villa. The tactical team, walks into the unsecured front door without announcing themselves or knocking. Seconds later, Alan Barret is dragged out in his boxer shorts, screaming, “Please be careful with my wife!” Del Toro, who was sure Alan was single, is stunned and feels further duped. Alan is not handcuffed but two officers are escorting him roughly, each holding an arm. Detective Khalifa Saeed follows, holding Alan’s clothes. The taskforce shoves Alan into the back of a police vehicle, and Khalifa Saeed tosses him some jeans and a t-shirt. Soon after, Alan’s wife is escorted out looking terrified and distress. She’s braless in a t-shirt that barely covers the small proof that she’s actually wearing underwear. One of the officers finds an abaya in her closet and hands it to her as they move her towards another vehicle. Del Toro walks over to Alan locked in the backseat, and both of them exchange stern looks through the window.

Turning his ear to the window, Alan shouts, “Del Toro, what the hell is going on! I thought we were friends!” He glares at Del Toro, and Del Toro stares back blankly, hiding his true feeling of anger for all the half-truths Alan has told him over their short friendship.
Del Toro cups his hands to the window and shouts, “Listen, Alan, they’re just going to run through your place and if they give you any trouble, I will get the consulate to help you out right away. Just sit tight, and this will all be over with shortly.”

“You couldn’t possibly consider me a suspect, Del Toro?” Alan yells. Del Toro doesn’t answer him. “After everything I’ve shown you, Del Toro, and the information I helped you with?”

“I don’t really know you, do I?”

“Sure, you do, Del Toro.”

“I didn’t know you had a wife,” Del Toro says, and Alan goes quiet. He continues interrogating him, “You know who Johann ‘Jack’ Unteweger is, don’t you, Alan?” Alan still says nothing, so Del Toro can’t help himself, “Of course you do. You’re a reporter reporting on a serial killer and his victims, so you must know who he is.”

Alan looks like a dog about to get hit with a newspaper, “Yeah…he’s the Austrian serial killer and journalist who wrote about his own crimes. So, you have to understand why you’re in the back of this truck right now.”

“You let me down, Del Toro. You really let me down.”

“No, Alan, you let me down. You tricked me. I know about your stints at St. Mary’s Psychiatric Facility. Or what about the Arizona Juvenile Detention Center?”

“That was all in the past, Del Toro.”

“But I know how tightly that past can hold on. It doesn’t let go even when you try to get away.” Del Toro catches himself feeling sorry for the man he once considered a friend. He shakes his head, and puts his hand to the window. Del Toro puts his hand to the other side mirroring the gesture before he walks away to meet Detective Khalifa Saeed, and says, “Listen Alan, I’m don’t want to believe it; I’m pulling for you.”
“We’ve searched every part of the house, and walked all around the courtyard. It’s a fairly small villa. Three bedrooms and a separate majlis. Only other structure is that little toolshed and it’s pretty much empty, a few tools. Like your profile said, the arrangement of the house shows serious compulsive tendencies, dishes evenly spaced in the cupboard, shoes and clothes all lined up in the closest. It’s creepy and strange, but there’s nothing linking him to any of the crimes. No locked boxes, no hidden panels, no safes in the walls behind paintings.”

“You sprayed the luminal, ran the black light?”

“There were a few spots in the bathroom that lit up, a few spots on their sheets, but it could all be normal cuts from shaving, sex in bed with the wife. The bathtub reeks of bleach, but who knows? It is a bathtub after all. They could have just cleaned it.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing. It’s like he just moved in a few months ago or something. He lives like a monk.”

“Goddamn it, Detective, he fits the profile to a T. He is the fucking profile! I wasn’t sure it would be accurate, but my profile couldn’t be more perfect for a person!”

“Well, you told us yourself; it’s not an exact science, but we can hold him in jail if you want. We can keep him there indefinitely without charging him with anything.”

“The American consulate will be down your throat in a minute.”

“There certainly isn’t any sign of weapons or trophies, and definitely no girl chained up.”

“Detective, find out more about his wife. See what her deal is.”

“We’re interviewing her right now,” Detective Khalifa Saeed presses his ear piece to his head, and coincidentally the officer with Alan’s wife yells something to them in Arabic. Detective Khalifa Saeed turns to Del Toro and says, “She told our officer they have another apartment in Abu Dhabi, where she works. We got the Abu Dhabi team running through it right now.” Together
they waited in silence for the results. After several minutes, Detective Khalifa Saeed gets
information through his listening device, and tells Del Toro, “The apartment is bare, too. They
say it looks super clean, like a woman lives there alone. Nothing’s there. They say it’s sparkling,
like the maid just cleaned and left five minutes ago.”

“Okay, okay, don’t let him see us sweat. Let’s pull ourselves together here. I’m going to
go over there and tell him that this is routine for this entire neighborhood. We’re doing this to
everyone.”

“Screw this guy! Who cares what he thinks of you or us?”

“Detective, he’s laughing at us right now. Whoever the killer is, if it’s not him, wherever
this fucking Alleyman is right now, he’s laughing at us.” Detective Khalifa Saeed and Del Toro
saunter toward the locked vehicle and let Alan out of the back seat. When he climbs out, he’s
smiling. He addresses Del Toro as if Detective Khalifa Saeed isn’t even there, “I told you you
wouldn’t find anything, Del Toro. I told you, I’m your friend.”

Del Toro tries to be convincing when he says, “I’m glad they didn’t find anything on you.
You’ll have to introduce me to you wife the next time I see you.” In another vehicle, officers are
releasing his wife at the same time.

“And you’ll have to introduce me to yours,” Del Toro says, clapping Alan on the back and
walking away. When he reconvenes with Detective Khalifa Saeed, he says, “Believe it or not,
Detective, I’ve got to leave you. My wife is flying into Abu Dhabi right now. She’ll lose her mind
if I’m not there for her the second she gets off the plane.”

“Sure, sure, go ahead. We’ll let you know how the rest of this nightmare goes.”
Chapter 67

(Al Twam Neighborhood – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

Every house in that neighborhood is perfunctorily searched and nothing of interest is found. The roadblocks are pulled, and the blue-and-red lights of the police vehicles are turned off. Indignant residents continue to mill the streets, arguing with the taskforce that raided their privacy. In true police fashion, the officers and investigators remain stone-faced and go about their business, ignoring the outcries of the community. Detective Khalifa Saeed calls Del Toro to tell him the rest of the search was a bust. He asks if Del Toro’s family made it in without incident, and he tells him everything is fine. His wife and son are exhausted and already asleep, then he asks, “Heading home yourself then?”

“No, got something else to do.”

“Moonlighting?”

The line goes dead for a moment as Khalifa Saeed doesn’t know what that word means. Del Toro clarifies, “Moonlighting means you work another job after your main job.”

“Oh, I got it. No, no. I’m going to go give Mansour Abdullah a kick in the kandura. He should have been here tonight, helping out, and he was absent. And he never got back to us about checking the bushes where we think the UNSUB changed his clothes. I had a team check into it. Nothing. Anyway, Mansour Abdullah better have a good excuse.”

“Yeah, no kidding. He lives close to there?”

“He does, actually. Right across the wadi.”

“He did say he wasn’t feeling well, remember?”

“I’m going to go over there to tell him we thought we had a lead, but it dried up.”

“Listen, you be careful.”

“What do you mean? You’re not still thinking it could be Mansour Abdullah, are you?”

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“I’m just telling you, be careful.” Once they get off the phone, Detective Khalifa Saeed heads over to Mansour Abdullah’s house and discovers that although it is difficult to get to Mansour Abdullah’s adjacent neighborhood by car because of the wadi between them, it would be quite a direct route by foot.

He pulls into the courtyard surrounding Officer Mansour Abdullah’s villa. Like most Emirati households, the gate is left open when they are home. The villa is quite large considering Mansour Abdullah and his wife have no children yet. Outside are parked a Jeep Cherokee, a Range Rover, and a Mercedes, all immaculately clean. He approaches the door and knocks loudly several times. Nobody appears to be home, which is strange considering the vehicles parked out front. Detective Khalifa Saeed is about to give up and head home when Mansour Abdullah opens the door, looking flustered, possibly even nervous. Detective Khalifa Saeed finds it peculiar that although it is the middle of the night, Mansour Abdullah doesn’t look like he’s been sleeping. More surprisingly, he also doesn’t invite Detective Khalifa Saeed inside, which is practically a social taboo in their culture. Night or day, he should have been invited in immediately, taken to the majlis, and served coffee and dates.

Mansour Abdullah speaks in Arabic, “Hey, Detective, what’s going on? It’s so late.”

“I was just checking to see how you’re doing? You said you weren’t feeling well, and I’ve been calling and calling you.”

“Oh, you have? I didn’t notice. I must have fallen asleep. How did things work out with the video,” he asks Khalifa Saeed who’s straining to look past him into the house.

“Oh, not so good. You were right. A waste of time.”

“That’s what I figured.”
“Well, okay, goodnight. I will see you tomorrow, God willing. Glad you’re feeling better. Oh, by the way, you never got back to us about checking the bushes.”

“Well, I ran into some of the guys on the way out and told them to process it without me.”

“Yeah, I sent them right after you left. I guess they were quicker than I thought. Okay, then, good night.”

“Yes, goodnight. I’ll see you tomorrow, God willing. May peace be upon you.”

“May peace be upon you as well.”

As Mansour Abdullah closes the door to his house, Detective Khalifa Saeed notices many bags of luggage lining the foyer, but it slams shut before he can see much more. He steps off the porch towards his car but can’t shake the feeling that something is off. The hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Before he leaves, he steps over to Mansour Abdullah’s vehicles to inspect them. The window tinting is so dark, he has to peer in through the front windshield which has the least tinting. The three vehicles look normal until he gets to the last one, the Jeep Cherokee, which is packed with more luggage and suitcases.

He pulls his vehicle out of Mansour Abdullah’s courtyard and leaves it idling outside his house on the street. He gets out and walks around to the one side of the courtyard’s exterior, noticing an alley. He follows it all the way till it empties out where he can look across the wadi to the neighborhood from which the raids were just conducted. In the distance, one last patrol car still has its blue-and-red lights on as two officers continue to chat outside of their police vehicle. It is close enough for him to see that that the officers are laughing but too far to hear their conversation. He walks back through the pathway and notices more branches of the alleyway system leading in different directions. He follows one branch and the sand is difficult to walk through, weeds and foliage make it almost impassable. He turns around and takes the other branch.
When this branch empties out, he notices that a whole different section of another neighborhood is accessible this way. He scans the area, when he notices something hidden under some weeds and debris. He pulls it away and it’s a white bike that looks eerily similar to the grainy image they saw at headquarters. He drags it out of its hiding place and gets on the phone, “This is Detective Khalifa Saeed, what units are still in the area of tonight’s operation?” The neighborhood has quieted down to crickets and cats calling in heat, like it should be. It’s alarmingly still, and he notices the telephone is shaking in his hand, he whispers in Arabic, “Send units in the area to Officer Mansour Abdullah’s residence with lights-and-sirens off. I’m sending a map-pin. I repeat lights-and-sirens off, but this is a code 6, code 6, come quickly.”

He turns around to make his way back to his car on the street and finds the light of the moon silhouetting a figure looming in the alley. It takes a restart of his heart and a quick inhalation to realize it’s Mansour Abdullah standing there with a sidearm in his hand. Detective Khalifa Saeed left his service weapon in the car, and now he’s trying hard not to let his lips quiver or his eyes water. He stifles a flinch when Mansour Abdullah steps forward and says, “Khalifa, is that the bicycle?”

“Yeah, I think so.” The detective willfully averts his eyes from the gun, thinking that to acknowledge it would alert Mansour Abdullah that he has suddenly become a suspect. As of yet, he hasn’t brandished the weapon, only allowed it to weigh his arm down like it’s too heavy to lift.

Then, Mansour Abdullah seems to breakdown, “What is that doing behind my house?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does the killer know where I live!” he yells.

“I don’t know. I haven’t touched it yet.”
Mansour Abdullah motions toward the bike with the barrel of his gun, “I didn’t put it there!” and flails his arms around, the gun moving frantically in different direction, “It’s not mine, I’m telling you, Detective Khalifa Saeed! Somebody must have put it there.”

“Nobody said you did, Mansour Abdullah.”

“Then why are you so nervous?” Mansour asks frenziedly, “You’re acting like I’m going to shoot you. I’m no threat!” Detective Khalifa Saeed can breathe again at the sight of his tactical team stealthily turning the corner and entering the alley behind Officer Mansour Abdullah. He raises his hands in the air, and Officer Mansour Abdullah is confused until he turns around and encounters assault rifles lined up at his head. He drops to his knees, and falls on his face in the dirt. The gun he is still holding is carelessly pointed at his own head. It takes some forceful reminding that he needs to release his weapon. When he does, he tosses the gun away like it’s a grenade. Four members of the team pounce on his back at once, but as survival instincts kick in, Officer Mansour Abdullah starts struggling. Stronger than each of them individually, the hostile tangle of former friends falls to the alley floor again before they get him to stop resisting. The tactical team drags him through the alley out into the street where neighbors have already started to gawk en masse. Mansour Abdullah is placed in the back of the squad car like Alan Barret had been earlier that night. Through the window, no one can hear him protesting, but they can see he’s enraged.

Detective Khalifa Saeed is feeling ill from the adrenaline dump his body is experiencing for the first time in his life. Once he’s stopped sweating, he calls over their female taskforce member, “Officer Amna, is the house clear?”

“Yes, sir, it’s empty.”

“Where’s Mansour Abdullah’s wife?”

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“I don’t know, but she’s not here. You’ve got to come see this.” She takes him by the elbow and pulls him from room to room as other officers daintily pick through every corner of the house. Finally, she exits out the back door, and motions for him to climb the twenty-foot ladder leading to the roof, which is familiar to every house in the U.A.E. It’s steel and precarious, but he makes it up to the top. Officer Amna follows and regains her breathe, “Just like Del Toro told us to look for, we found his hiding place. Look here in the tank.” The sixty-gallon tank has a short, nailed ladder of its own. He climbs to the top and twists off the lid. At first, he can only see the water-regulating buoy floating in the water. Then Officer Amna says, “Shine your light down there at the bottom. You see there. It’s a box. I tried to get it out with a stick, but it wouldn’t come up.”

“I can’t wait for this thing to drain. Besides, if we drain it and climb in there, it’s going to be impossible to climb out. I’m going in.” As others have gathered around the bottom of the ladder to the roof, calling up to them, Detective Khalifa Saeed unbuttons the collar of his kandura and starts pulling it over his head. Officer Amna doesn’t know what to do with herself and turns bright red, stammering in utter embarrassment at the sight of her boss in his underwear. She turns back around at the sound of water sloshing out of the lid as Khalifa Saeed readies himself for the dive. It sounds like he’s in music synthesizer as he yells through the tank, “When I come up with the box, I’ll hand it to you. Take it down the ladder, and I will come out and put my kandura back on...to protect your modesty.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” He dives to the bottom of the tank, which is about eight feet of water. The pressure in his ears pops slightly at the bottom as he grabs the box, and he’s surprised at how heavy it is. He turns around with his feet planted on the bottom of the tank and pushes off so that he can shoot out of the water and grab onto the rim of the lid with the hand not holding the
box. With one hand he pulls himself up to take a quick breath, then he has to submerge himself again to power the box through the hole and let it go. Then, he immediately comes back up for air. Being inside has displaced the water all the way to the portal from which he entered, so he struggles to pull his head through to breathe. He didn’t hear the box clang to the floor while he was under water, but he assumes Officer Amna caught it. When he tries to get out he realizes, it’s much harder to exit the opening than it was to plunge in. His arms will have to be sticking straight up in the air in order for him to fit and pull his body through without help. He calls for Officer Amna, but when she doesn’t answer, he knows she’s already climbed down the stairs. He supposes that if he stays in there long enough, someone will climb back up looking for him, but he decides to try again. He dives down to the bottom, crouches down as low as he can go and pushes as hard as he can, pointing his hands through the hole like an arrow. His body passes out through the hole past his elbows. It scrapes his arms as he shimmies out, but he makes it out, panting and thanking Allah for saving him twice in one evening.

He comes down the ladder to a ruckus waiting for him in front of Mansour Abdullah’s villa. Police officers of the taskforce are divided in two factions, one fighting their way to get at Mansour Abdullah, locked in the back seat, and the other trying their best to hold them back. Seeing the commotion, he runs over soaking wet and practically naked through thin transparent material of his damp kandura. He screams and says, “STOP! Enough!” the angry mob takes the box, and shoves it in his face saying, “Look in here. See for yourself.” He snatches the box from them, and both groups take a collective pause, waiting for Detective Khalifa Saeed’s reaction. He opens the box, and blanches at the contents. Several stacks of Polaroids in clear zip-lock baggies jolt his attention. The first picture he encounters has captured Saarah Khalil in very lude pose. Without opening the bag, he shakes around the Polaroids beneath the plastic, and he can see that
each one is more lurid than the next. From the backseat, Manour Abdullah screams, “I loved her! I loved her! I was going to marry her!” Someone hands the detective a pair of rubber gloves, and he slowly separates the sealed ends of the bag. As he takes out the stack of pictures and begins thumbing through the smut, the crowd of policemen tighten around him to get a peek at the perversion. Many of the images feature Mansour Abdullah with his second cousin engaged in various sexual acts.

Mansour Abdullah says under his breath, “Good girl, huh?” While most of the crowd is focused on the detective, a few of the lynch mob have gone around to the other side of the truck. They bust out the wind with a stone, and before the others can react, they drag Mansour Abdullah out by the feet, kicking and twisting. A melee ensues, some officers trying to protect the integrity of justice, other officers attempting to rip the assumed defiler apart with their bare hands. Still others are trying to keep both groups from fighting each other. In the fray, the broken paving stone used to smash in the window is chucked at Mansour Abdullah head, striking with an appalling crunch of bone, followed by a second thud as his head smashes into the curb. The entire group, still alit with rage, drops into a simmering tension as they gather around the bloody rivulets oozing from Mansour Abdullah’s fractured skull.
Chapter 68

(Police Headquarters – Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.)

By the time the news of last night’s events reached me, it was morning. I tried to wake up Amanda and the baby to go to breakfast downstairs, but they were suffering from severe jetlag and absolutely refused to get up. I took a taxi to the Police Headquarters where Detective Khalifa Saeed started filling me in as much as he could. The entire taskforce assembled shortly after I arrived, and we quickly filled a boardroom. Ironically, no one was absent for this meeting. There was a light feeling in the air, and I could tell that everyone seemed pretty happy with themselves and the outcome. I was getting ready to throw a wet blanket on the whole atmosphere. I had heard there was a lot of commotion at the scene, but I didn’t expect to see so many scuffs and bruises.

Even though I had tried to assume control of the taskforce and felt like calling the group to attention, Detective Khalifa Saeed was the default leader, especially after last night. Detective Khalifa Saeed addressed the assembly by talking about how he hadn’t suspected a thing from Mansour Abdullah until he went to his house to check on him. Since then, the passport of Mansour Abdullah’s wife was checked for activity, and it was verified that she had been staying in America for the last several months with a sick brother receiving cancer treatment in Chicago. Mansour Abdullah’s bags were packed to meet here there. The items in the suitcases were mostly hers, and it still isn’t clear how long Mansour Abdullah planned to stay in America, but he had obtained a visa recently and hadn’t informed anyone about a leave-of-absence.

Finally, I interrupted the good times and asked, point blank, “Detective, what evidence do we have that convinces you that Mansour Abdullah is the Alleyman?”

“Of course, we have the Polaroids found hidden at the bottom of the water tank, which is highly suspicious. He obviously didn’t want those pictures to be found because it clearly shows he had an inappropriate relationship with cousin Saarah.”
I interjected, “You did tell me that he planned on marrying her, which is not illegal in your country. As a Muslim, you can have multiple wives, and it is still common practice to marry your cousin, even your first cousin, and she was twice removed.”

Another officer spoke-up for Detective Khalifa Saeed, “This is true, but the photos have been inspected by some of the family members, and her hairstyle in many of the photos indicate she was underage at the time he was engaging with her this forbidden relationship.”

“Also,” another officer with a blackeye stood up, “It is not tolerated in our culture to meet an intended wife without a chaperone before marriage.”

I said, “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.”

Before the entire room could scoff at me, Detective Khalifa Saeed made his biggest play, “Most importantly, Mr. Del Toro, let’s not forget that the bicycle from the video was found, and…” he let the room wait in suspense for what he said next, which was a complete surprise, “…once the forensic team came for the bike, the entire rape kit was found beneath the bicycle as well.”

All the men and Officer Amna joined in to clap and applaud. I was so filled with disbelief that Detective Khalifa Saeed brought out the rape kit and started laying each item on the table with gloved hands like they were museum artifacts. He said, “We found inside this duffel bag a large abaya, a khanjar, zip-ties, a gag, a scalpel, and even some items of from the missing women. Barrettes, a necklace, and other accessories.”

I stood with my arms crossed, “I hope all of that has been swabbed for DNA.”

Officer Amna answered, “Thoroughly. We are awaiting results.”

“Any eyes?” I asked and attendees went dumb.

Eventually Officer Amna managed to muster, “Excuse me?”

“Did you find the eyes?”
She hung her head, and muttered, “No. No sign of them.” I almost told the group that he may have eaten them, but put had the wherewithal to put a cork in it.

I couldn’t help but feel swindled by the killer and the taskforce’s eagerness to put the case to bed. I tried to express my doubts, “Everybody, everybody, please listen. All of these items were conveniently located, don’t you think? Everything we talked about points to Alan Barret as a more likely suspect, and we have to remember, HE’S GOOD AT WHAT HE DOES! He fooled me to the end. I believed him and thought he was a fellow compatriot. I bought it, hook, line, and sinker.”

“But Mr. Del Toro,” the older Emirati big-wig from previous seminars materialized out of nowhere again, “we checked his entire property, and his wife’s, and there was absolutely no evidence.”

“Go again, check the yard. Bring ground-penetrating sonar for burial sites.”

“It’s a rented property. The landlord lives next door. He said he approved and monitored the sod being laid and trees being planted himself.”

“What about Mansour Abdullah’ yard?

“Of course, we check it. There was nothing.”

“We need to interview Mansour Abdullah. We need to play hard ball with him, and see if he either confesses and gives up the location of the other victims or if he sticks to his story. I think he’s going to stick to his story,” I said, and my phone went off midsentence. It was the hotel. I let it go to voice mail because I was almost ready to leave. I would call my wife as soon as I was finished.

“As you know, Mr. Del Toro, it humiliates us to say that our suspect and former colleague is in a medically-induced coma right now. Unfortunately, many of the tactical team that helped
the taskforce before the searches were from Al Ain, and some were even related directly to both Saraah Khalil and Mansour Abdullah. They displayed terrible discipline, so, of course, they will be punished for their inappropriate behavior.”

“I would hope so. They’ve blown the whole case. If he dies or becomes a vegetable from here on out, we’ll never know if he was the killer or where the other victims are located. It’s unconscionable. It’s…it’s absolutely reprehensible.”

Although a tacit shame hung in the air, the entire room remained expressionless in that haughty way I had come to recognize in my hosts. The excitement and pride dropped like a rain cloud breaking over a funeral. I felt accusatory and overly judgmental, so I tried to do what I could to lighten the load, “Only time will tell. If the killings suddenly stop, you can have some, *SOME*, assurance that you got your man, I suppose.” Only Detective Khalifa Saeed seemed to take what I said to heart, wearing all the pride of a boxer who takes a forfeit win stoppage by low blow.

The meeting was adjourned and I said my goodbyes. I couldn’t get home fast enough, and I knew my wife would be upset that she had only gotten here just to turn around and fly back home in the next few days. The first officer who accompanied Detective Khalifa Saeed when I first arrived drove me back to my hotel. I rushed towards the elevator, and the concierge trotted after me with a note in his hand. I took it expecting to find my wife’s handwriting, but instead, the blood ran out of my face when I read:

Dear Ramon,

Your beautiful wife and child have been a pleasure. The young master has your eyes. Too bad he didn’t get hers. They are spectacular. We’re giving them our special hospitality, and then I’ll show them some sights they’ll never forget before we return them to you.

Sincerely, Alan Barret
Epilogue
(The Fairmont Hotel – Al Ain, U.A.E.)

My thoughts were whirling, I didn’t know where to begin. I thought about stealing the next car that pulled into the valet, but where would I go? My disgrace was so paralyzing I had to crawl out of the crumbling husk of myself to call Detective Khalifa Saeed. Straightaway, he sent units to both the villa in Al Ain and the apartment in Abu Dhabi. I waited in the lobby for a report back, chewing on my tie to keep from screaming up at the ceiling, but word came back that no one was there. After what seemed like a hopeless eternity, one of the officers arrived so that I could accompany the team on a tri-city search. I was running towards the side exit, when my wife came walking through the revolving door of the hotel. She was smiling and overloaded with Cole in one hand, her purse and diaper bag over her shoulders, and a gift-wrapped box tucked under her arm. I ran and smothered her in a trebling embrace of flooding relief. All my misgivings and trepidations about my love and loyalty to my unpretentious wife, ten years younger than me and embarrassingly out of my league, compressed into a singularity of dedication that unblinded me in the blink of an eye = her eyes, that were miraculously still in her head! I stared into them, letting the trauma of her absence and the outcome of her safe return coalesced as a new elemental compound that could never be separated from me. It would forever be the time I thought I lost everything, really lost everything – not just lost her faith with my infidelities, not like the loss of my job, but the time I almost lost everything, and had it handed back to me by a taker of lives. I felt this once when I had gone rock-climbing at Hueco Tanks National Park. I lost my balance, the terror of plummeting to my death sucked into my lungs, and my brother snatched me by the shirt back to the cliff’s edge. The sensation of panic and relief in my chest felt exactly the same.

I kissed her in full view of the lobby like she had returned from Hades and crossed over the river Styx, modesty laws of the U.A.E. be damned! After being separated so long and our
other recent tribulations, she loved the attention from me, but could ‘t quite understand where it
was coming from, as I had never told her of my concerns about Alan. It was the kind of reassurance
she had wanted from me for years, and I always seemed too busy or complacent to give something
so simple. I always meant to and wanted to, but there always seemed a better time, a better place,
perhaps at Christmas I would show her with a meaningful gift, or perhaps, I thought, we’d take a
small vacation when I made a little more money, sold another book. Then, I told myself, I could
better express my love.

I nearly took her and the baby down to the floor when Amanda finally said, “What’s gotten
into you? You should have given me that reception last night at the airport.”

“Where is Alan?”

“He said he was sorry he couldn’t say bye in person, but they had a flight to catch. He and
his wife are flying to Romania. No wait…I think it was Albania. I can’t remember. Such lovely,
fascinating people, those two. He knows a lot about this place. You’re lucky to have met them.”

“Amanda, try to remember where they said they were going.”

“I really don’t remember, we talked so much at lunch, but he gave me this to give to you.”

I took hold of the gift and strode over to the lobby couches. I went to pull the ribbon and
thought better of it. Perhaps I should have it x-rayed and opened by the bomb squad at
headquarters. It was fairly light, and didn’t seem threatening. I couldn’t stop myself from opening
it right away. Inside, I found framed in glass an ornate khanjar with red ruby eyes glowing in the
silver wolf handle. Beneath it was another note in the same handwriting:

Dear Ramon,

You own me a book. I believe that was our arrangement. When the time comes, I’ll find
you because a great story never dies. Until then, here is something to remember me by.
Sincerely,

Alan Barret
APPENDIX

1. From Chapter 7

(New York Tribune article by Skip Holland)

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES’ FIRST SERIAL KILLER?

The theory that three bodies recently discovered in the desert of the United Arab Emirates could be the victims of a serial killer is being proposed by anonymous sources for the first time in this publication.

However, confidence wanes among residences of the U.A.E. that authorities have the resources or experience to deal with what has almost exclusively been a “Western” crime.

The acknowledgment that three human remains unearthed in a “cluster” within 500 yards from each other are of Asian descent is the only confirmation that reliable sources would attest. Under the well-documented notion that any unauthorized statement about U.A.E. could result in hefty fines or lengthy prison sentences, the Tribune was able to secure verification from an American doctor working in Dubai and an Emirati police officer who risked termination to disclose a few sparse details. Both claimed they “blew the whistle” because they felt the citizens of the U.A.E. should be informed of such a dangerous situation. A similar proclamation has not been made by the U.A.E. press at the time of this publication.

A further source in the medical field who was unwilling to go on record stated the three bodies have very similar injuries that point to foul play. Our anonymous sources were reluctant to give any details about the victims’ identities other than to say there is sufficient evidence to initiate an investigation into their connection.

No information has been released to the public in the U.A.E. except for a small blurb in the local Khaleej Times that three unidentified remains were discovered in the desert wilderness last
week. Immediately after the publication, an anonymous source from a U.A.E. publication reached out the New York Tribune with concerns of a cover up and governmental censorship. Subsequently, the Tribune sent a team of journalists who worked both officially and clandestinely to gather as much information as possible from reliable resources. The anonymous journalist who currently resides in the U.A.E. relayed to our reporters that an inordinate number of concerned citizens claim to be relatives of women who have recently gone missing. The concerned citizens sought our anonymous source when stonewalled by governmental officials and the Khaleej Times. This outcry of citizens led the anonymous journalist to theorize that many more expatriate residents have mysteriously gone missing than are being acknowledged.

One Filipino resident who wished to remain nameless stated, “I know [sic] her a long time. We come from the same village and came here together. I have roomed with her for five years. I know her like my own hand; she wouldn’t run off without saying good-bye.”

A fact of life for expatriates in an authoritarian society such as the U.A.E. is that people sometimes flee the country for their own well-being and safety without telling anyone. According to many expatriates who were interviewed, this is commonly referred to as “pulling a runner.” In such situations, foreign residents have fled the country because they have accumulated debt, scammed the system, maxed out credit cards with no intentions of paying, or have otherwise purposefully or inadvertently broken the law. Furthermore, strict anti-abortion laws, prison mandates for unwed pregnancies, and requirements for doctors to report such instances often leave women no choice but to flee the country with nothing but the shirts on their backs. This seems to be the default excuse given by the U.A.E. representatives when posed with the question of where these missing residents have gone.
When asked if their passports indicated any transaction of travel or deportation, the Chief of Abu Dhabi police, Abdul Aziz Al Jaberi, stated, “There are many ways that people escape the border of the U.A.E. into Oman, Qatar, or even India or Pakistani without having their passport stamped here. Once in another country, they find a way to move on from there.” When asked if this was a common problem, he stated, “Certainly not, but it does happen.”

What remains clear is that the all-encompassing curtain of “no comment” from the federal authorities continues to keep the citizens in the dark, and many are wondering if their lives are at stake on the streets. Many of the questions presented by our journalists were met with an all-too-familiar phrase in the Middle Eastern lexicon – “Inshallah.” It is a holy phrase intermingled in daily conversations that literally means, “God willing,” but to Westerns, it often comes off as unconvincing “maybe.”

Such is the current state of affairs in the U.A.E. with very few people aware that a violent predator could be among them. Most metropolises around the world eventually create conditions that invite such a scourge, and the first defense against a serial killer is to acknowledge that one is on the loose.

As far as our investigation could obtain, the victims could be from any number of countries; however, our medical resources would only confirm the current victims were of Asian descent. To add speculation, authorities have yet to confirm or deny whether the citizens of Dubai, Ahu Dhabi, or even Al Ain (the three most populated cities in the U.A.E.) should be most concerned.

With the release of this story, the whistleblowers hope to pressure the U.A.E. government into releasing official information. Until then, this is what we could confirm from out hobbled informants:
An Emirati man and his son found an initial body while hiking through the desert. Once the man was located by the press, he seemed willing to tell his story, but governmental ranks quickly closed in. At which point, the man would no longer relay if he was, indeed, the person who had found the body (or bodies?). However, several videos and pictures taken from a distance by citizens and journalists seem to show investigative activity in that desert region of Al Ain.

Relatives of missing women in every Emirate have experts speculating victims could have been moved from one Emirate to another. This would be akin to transporting a victim across state lines in America, often causing confusion and infighting over which jurisdiction should investigate a case. The same problem could be expected among the U.A.E. authorities who have different police forces in every Emirate.

Those citizens seeking information about their missing loved ones remain steadfast that the sooner the three women are identified, the sooner an investigation into their demise and who is responsible can begin. Anyone with concerns or evidence into the missing or deceased women should contract U.A.E. officials before contacting our email or hotline.
SUMMARY OF CLINICAL HISTORY:

Patient was a 21-year-old female Asian of Middle Eastern origin, with no significant past medical history who was found in a kneeling position in late stages of rigor mortis under the cover of a tent that was semi-closed but still open to exposure from the desert elements. Upon EMS and police authority arrival, patient was deceased. No blood or bodily fluids were present at the body’s location so cause of death could not be determined onsite. No attempts by EMS were administered. Upon immediate inspection, female patient was deemed deceased, and no vital signs were present. EMS reports no contact or attempts at revival were made by the citizen who discovered the patient. EMS and police authorities arrived within 20 minutes of the 999 call due to the harsh desert terrain without roads. Examination of the disrobed body revealed several signs of mutilation. Determination of pre- and post-mortem injuries are inconclusive, but many were pre-mortem, resulting in exsanguination. Final kneeling body position would not have happened naturally indicating positioning and posturing of the body by outside deliberate means.

Recent medical records indicate a previous weight of 49.895 kilograms. Weight upon arrival measured approximately 45 kilograms indicating more than 4 litres of blood and other bodily fluids were lost.

DESCRIPTION OF GROSS LESIONS:

EXTERNAL EXAMINATION:
The body is that of a 21-year-old female of diminutive to average development, well-nourished and seemingly healthy. There is peripheral edema of the extremities, resulting in hematomas on the right quadricep, the *regio antebrachialis* of both upper extremities, and on the *proximal interphalangeal* joints of all *phalanges* excluding the thumb, indicating possible defensive wounds.

There is a total of seven sharp force injuries on the upper part of the body, none on the lower extremities, and two disturbances of the eyelids as they appear to be hollow. Upon close inspection each eyeball was enucleated from the orbital with a sharp object completely severing the optic nerve. In performing this injury, slight abrasions and minute lacerations are discernible on the tarsal plate of the lateral eyelid.

One sharp force injury on the left forearm midway between the wrist and elbow on the outer *regio antebrachialis* and two on the right, one closer to the wrist and one closer to the elbow, indicate a slashing injury as the likely result of a defensive position of arms raised in protection of the face or throat.

One significant sharp force injury resulted in a deep tissue laceration with a detectable curving trajectory, starting in the *hypochondrium*, specifically the precise center of the *epigastric* area, with the gash curving upward behind the xyphoid process and into the diaphragm. Hematomas around the abdominal injury indicate a possible hilt of a weapon or a blunt force contacting the surrounding *epidermis* with the thrust of the sharp object. The evident hematoma and the multiple lacerations within the edges of the gash suggests multiple thrusts of the knife were made in the
same insertion point. The resultant gash measures 8 ½ inches in depth with a discernable curve ending at a tapered end at the extent of the wound with wider injury at the insertion point.

Two substantial sharp force injuries laterally across the epidermal and deep tissue area with one injury opening a gash in the hypopharynx approximately 5 centimeters below the jawline, but not completely severing the trachea. The second laceration follows along the same injury, slightly deviating from the laceration in an upward laceration towards that left ear/jawline, resulting in deep tissue wounds of the sternocleidomastoid, completely severing the external jugular and superficially lacerating both the internal jugular and carotid artery. This indicates a sharp force injury inflicted with a very keen instrument that started right of the throat and continued to the left.

INTERNAL EXAMINATION (BODY CAVITIES):
The right and left pleural cavity of the lungs appears normal with minimal expected fluid for a victim that bled out and there is minimal fluid in the peritoneal cavity of the heart.

HEART: The heart is large with a normal shape and a weight of 380 grams, consistent with a patient in acrid condition during late rigor mortis. The pericardium is intact. The epicardial fat is diffusely firm.

AORTA: There is minimal atherosclerosis with no measurable plaques along the full length of the ascending and descending aorta as expected in a healthy young female.

LUNGS: The right lung weighed 610 grams, the left weighed 700 grams. The lung parenchyma is pink without evidence of congestion of hemorrhage. The bronchi are grossly normal.
**GASTROINTESTINAL SYSTEM:** The liver is perforated and slightly bifurcated by sharp force injury with the laceration missing the stomach by approximately 5 centimeters but continuing into the diaphragm, which is perforated approximately 4 centimeters. The esophagus and stomach are normal in appearance without evidence of injury. The stomach contains approximately 700 ml, without evidence of any medication, pills, tablets, or other non-food material. She wasn’t malnourished but hadn’t eaten before her death for hours.

**RETICULOENDOTHELIAL SYSTEM:** The spleen is normal, weighing 340 grams.

**GENITOURINARY SYSTEM:** The right kidney weighs 195 grams, the left weighs 200 grams. Uterus and fallopian tubes are intact. Sexual assault forensic exam was conducted and no seminal fluids were detected. No signs of vaginal or anal tearing or lacerations. Hymen is not intact and signs of former sexual activity are present.

**ENDOCRINE SYSTEM:** The adrenal glands are in the normal position and weigh 7.0 grams on the right and 10.6 grams on the left. The thyroid gland weighs 11.4 grams and is grossly normal. Accounting for shrinkage due to arid condition, all internal organs seem normal. (Endocrine samples were taken to test for adrenaline levels.)

**EXTREMITIES:** Deep tissue wounds from sharp force injury lacerated epidermis and significant laceration to the left *flexor digitorum superficialis* and two similar injuries to the right, one more significant than the other. These wounds would not have been fatal. Both legs and calves were measured and found to be very similar in circumference. Both legs were also milked and produced no clots in the venous system.

**CLINICOPATHOLOGIC CORRELATION**
This patient died by homicide shortly after incurring sharp force injuries to the interior and exterior jugular veins, the carotid artery, and the hypopharynx. Combined with other hemorrhaging injuries on the arms and abdomen, the severed trachea and perforated diaphragm would have contributed to very shallow breathing, extremely low blood pressure, and eventual brain death due to low oxygen levels and cardiac arrest. All injuries would have been survivable with medical attention except for the wounds to the throat. Those would have been almost instantly fatal.

The most significant finding on autopsy was the presence of such a unique wound that indicates an unusual and easily identifiable type of weapon if one is ever presented. Furthermore, the enucleation of the eye globes represents an intentional injury so rare and abnormal even for a homicide, that it points to deeply meditative and psychological motives as the injuries would have no other purpose except to cause pain and/or loss of sight (if premortem) and completely unsubstantiated (if postmortem). The time of enucleation cannot be determined, but the stab wound to the abdomen shows signs of bruising which would indicate premortem. Due to relatively clean injuries to the orbital socket, the enucleation was skillfully done and couldn’t have been performed so precisely pre-mortem. The fatal event itself would have been extremely quick, but the hematomas and other defensive wounds on the legs and arms point to a prolonged struggle on behalf of the victim before exsanguination.

Although this case is fairly straight forward in terms of what caused the terminal event, perhaps the more interesting question is why the victim was mutilated and what tools were used to cause the injuries as the weapon used to slash and stab the abdomen were likely not the same as the more-precise and delicate tool needed to perform the enucleation, indicating postmortem mutilation.
SUMMARY AND REFLECTION:

Death is ruled a homicide with extreme prejudice. Test results of the endocrine system and fluids show exceedingly elevated adrenaline levels, which means the victim was alive and conscious through many of the injuries incurred. The body was found dressed and extremely clean with no traces of blood in or around the body. Therefore, the site of retrieval was not the site of homicide, nor were events between the placement of the body and the injuries of the body immediate. Time passed between the two events, but not long or rigor mortis would have transitioned to secondary flaccidity.
3. From Chapter 29

(Fairmont Resort, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. – Interview Recording transcript)

- Please be seated, and we can get started. Today is November twelfth, two-thousand nineteen. I am Investigative Consultant Ramon Angel Del Toro. Please state your full name for the record.

- Mansour Abdullah Mahmoud Mohammed Al Meqbali. Officer Mansour Abdullah.

- You are here of your own recognizance…excuse me…you are here of your own choice, and you are aware that this a fact-finding interview about the homicide of Saarah Khalil Abdullah Ahmed Al Meqbali, is that correct?

- Yes. Is there some reason Detective Khalifa Saeed is not here with us?

- He thought you would be more forthcoming with a stranger, and he assured me that you could handle the questions quite well in English. For other interviews, he will certainly be the one interviewing your relatives.

- Fine.

- You have essentially been read your rights as a citizen of your country by my host and colleague Detective Khalifa Saeed with the understanding that I am here from the United States as a consultant on a series of murder cases, correct?

- Correct.

- Do you need a translator?

- No, English is required for occupation…for the Abu Dhabi Police Department in Al Ain. Also, I studied in America.

- Great. What part?

- I was in Cleveland. It’s a popular place here. We all send our relatives who are sick with cancer there.
Hmm, Interesting. I didn’t know that. Fantastic. Okay, it’s a bit strange NOT to be speaking with the actual persons closest to the victim...that is, her parents, her friends, her instructors, whatnot. We asked to speak to them first. Is there some circumstance that prevents them from being interviewed today? I mean, I know it is Ramadan time and that you are all fasting and sacrificing, but...ah...

- So, if I had brought my cousin’s family here and all of her friends, you would have sat them down in front of all this?

- Oh, no, sir. We would have found another location to interview them. I invited you here today because you are a police officer, and although some might consider your being here a conflict of interest, Detective Khalifa Saeed assured me that your cooperation in this matter will be very beneficial to us, so please, explain your relationship with the deceased.

- I am her cousin.

- First cousin, by blood, as in one of your parents is a sibling to one of her parents?

- No, not exactly.

- Okay, please explain.

- Saarah’s father is the son of my father’s brother.

- I see, so she would be what we call a second-cousin. Her father is your first cousin.

- Yes, exactly.

- Detective Khalifa Saeed and I have been hashing out our findings, and we invited you here today because he mentioned that you might be part of our taskforce...if he is given the permission to officially select members for one.
- Yes, Mr. Del Toro, I know this technique...to build up my stress levels and make me feel nervous, but do you think that you can cover that up for now? The pictures and all of that? It very muqrifun, you know, making my stomach turn over. I can almost smell the bodies.

- Ahh, yes, sure, I can try to cover it up. There’s a curtain that pulls over, but it will put us in the dark a little bit.

- That would be better.

- So, my question still stands, why did you agree to come here today? Detective Khalifa Saeed said you might have something to offer.

- It’s a very difficult time for our family right now, as you can think, and I would rather talk to you for my family than you talk to them. It is very unusual for a woman to be alone in a room with a man in our culture.

- Even in such a drastic situation as this?

- Even if my mom, my sisters, or aunts were in a doctor’s office, they would NEVER be alone with a male doctor.

- Well, I hope you feel that the female officer we’ve chosen will do a proper job of interviewing your relatives, but why don’t you tell me what you know?

- There is nothing to know, really. I don’t think my cousin’s daughter – Saarah Khalil – has been deceitful or anything like that.

- So, our team is scrubbing her phone and all her devices right now for that. As far as you’re aware, she wasn’t having a relationship with anyone online or meeting up with anyone after school or after hours or anything like that?

- No, sir, she didn’t tell our family everything, but we think what she did was very innocent.

- Can you elaborate on that? What do you mean, ‘What she did’?
- She had a volleyball tournament. She was very sporty, you know, played many sports.
- So, she legitimately had a tournament to attend? Where would that have been?
- Yes. She told her mother that she was going to drive up to Dubai with a friend, and back the same night.
- And you guys have verified that she went there with her friend?
- Her friend told us a lie. She said she went up to Dubai with Saarah, but that was before she knew what happened to her. After we told her, she told us that she didn’t go up there with Saarah because she was feeling sick. But her friend said she was sure Saarah went there for the tournament by herself. She was very excited about playing.
- Why did her friend lie?
- When her friend was too sick to go, she said that Saarah asked her to lie if her mom called because she was worried her mother wouldn’t let her drive to the tournament alone. Have you been to Dubai yet? The streets in Dubai are very bad. Very easy to get lost.
- Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind if I drive there. Now, there are speed cameras along the highway that verify she went up there alone then?
- Yes, we have video taken all the way up to where the tournament was. We have checked those, and she is there on camera driving alone.
- You’re aware we have a fairly accurate window of time and location of where she was abducted, correct? Or perhaps she was lured?
- I don’t think she could have been lured. She really was expected at the tournament. She was one of the best players. She’s the smallest on the team, but she’s the captain. I guess it’s possible she was tricked or something because the campus where the tournament was
held is big, mostly no lights at night in that area, and there are no cameras where she parked.

- Her car was found there, correct?

- Yes, her car is being...scrubbed...as you said, for fingerprints and the little evidence, what do you call it?

- Yes, trace evidence.

- Sorry, yes, trace evidence. But there was no blood in the car or where her car was found, so where did she get stabbed?

- You’re confident that she wasn’t meeting anyone or having a secret rendezvous?

- We are certain. She wasn’t like that. She was a good girl! She just made a mistake driving there alone.

- How could this have happened on a university campus?

- Whoever took her didn’t have a car because we checked all the cars that you can see in the videos. There’s nothing. He must have come by some other way – subway, walking, bicycle, maybe even on one of these scooter things.

- But the actual abduction wasn’t caught on footage?

- No, there were many cameras, but in that little area, you cannot see with the camera.

- Ah, a blind spot. It seems the killer did his homework then?

- Yes, studied it.

- Seems to point to an abduction, or perhaps she went willingly with someone she knew.

  You weren’t there, were you?

- Of course, I wasn’t there!

- No need to be upset, Mr. Abdullah....
- Mansour Abdullah.

- Yes, yes, I’m sorry, Mansour Abdullah, we are going to check the location of all of her relatives, especially her male relatives and friends, to see if they were in the area, and I wouldn’t want your phone to show that it was in some place that you’re saying it wasn’t. I’m sure you understand.

- That seems like a lot of work for nothing.

- We do the best that we can. We don’t want to miss something and look like fools later because we didn’t cover all our bases, and I’m sure you want to cooperate, too.

- Are we finished?

- One moment please, I have a few more questions here. While we were processing your second-cousin, you were quite…distraught. Very upset. What made you react this way?

- MY COUSIN WAS MURDERED!

- I understand that. We are sympathetic to your family’s loss, but you have to see it from an investigative standpoint.

- What standpoint is that? I don’t understand?

- From our point of view, we have to question the sincerity of such an emotional outburst from someone so much older and somewhat distantly related.

- I don’t think you understand an Emirati family. We are all very close, and I helped her grow up.

- Spent a lot of time with her personally?

- Yes, of course.

- Were you often alone during these times?

- Sometimes, yes.
- Even into her teenage and early adult years? Now that she had stared college?

- *Yes, probably even more so. She was mature enough to have conversations with, talk to, joke with. But Mr. Del Toro, what are you asking? Are you... what’s the word... what’s the word... IMPLYING! Yes, are you implying something.*

- Well, this may make you uncomfortable, and I’m bringing this up with you rather than with her immediate family, but we found something very interesting in her autopsy report.

- *What? What was interesting?*

- Well, we cannot say for certain whether she was sexually assaulted, but there is indication that she had had previous sexual relations. This indicates that she might have been sexually active before the incident.

- *I don’t believe it! How would you know this? She was a good girl.*

- So, you’re saying that you have no idea who she might have been seeing? Who she might have had a relationship with?

- *No. Not at all.*

- And you didn’t have that kind of relationship with her?

- *Now, you’re making me very angry again.*

- Please, please, have a seat, Mansour Abdullah. You have to understand that these kinds of things happen. They’re quite common, actually.

- *No, here they’re not.*

- You say that, sir, but I researched and found that it is still practiced here regularly.

- *What is?*

- Marrying your cousin. PLEASE, PLEASE, ABDULLAH MANSOUR, sit, sit down! Just answer my question, is it still practiced here?
- *Not with me.*

- But it is still practiced here.

- *NOT MUCH ANYMORE! You’re insulting me now! Insulting all of us!*

- In fact, it is acceptable to marry your first cousin, and you’ve brought it to our attention that you’re second cousins; therefore, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that you might have…become enamored with her?

- *This is crazy.*

- You can tell me, Mansour Abdullah. It’s better to talk about these things now, get ahead of it, people can understand the heat of passion.

- *I think we are finished now. I have answered your ridiculous questions.*

- Oh yes, you can go break your fast now, Mr. Mansour. I hope I didn’t upset you too much. I’m just trying to show you that when I’m in the same room with the killer, I won’t be pleasant. I hope you wouldn’t expect anything less from me…Well if that’s all – *Ramadan Kareem.*

- *Yes, fine! Ramadan Kareem!*
4. *From Chapter 36*

(United Arab Emirates – Travel Blog, entry 1, author unlisted)

As your tour guide, we’ll explore the illustrious country of the United Arab Emirates, stopping off the beaten path and exploring hidden gems that few see. Our starting point is a mere taxi ride from the airport where travelers can throw their feet up on the beach after a long voyage or where locals can relax for an all-inclusive staycation – *The Fairmont Bab Al Bahr Hotel.*

The Fairmont is a spectacular, five-star hotel with a view of the country’s premiere tourist attraction, The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, gleaming white across one of the tributaries to the Gulf Sea. Designed by French architects to accommodate thousands of guests in luxury, it is the perfect rendezvous point for shadowy, clandestine operatives out on a mission.

If one were so inclined, skulking figures could don beach hats purchased from the gift shop, dart in and out of the labyrinthine layout of restaurants and bars, and sneak past the pool. Why not grab a cocktail on the way out? There along the beach will be an unwitting *abra* boat gondolier ready to shuttle guests through a man-made canal from the Fairmont Hotel to the majestic, tiered market beneath the *Shangri-La Abu Dhabi Resort*, where even the most astute spy on a tail could be lost with ease. Once the tail is shaken, a variety of getaway options await, such as the ubiquitous grey taxi, a shuttle bus to the main attractions, or a limousine for our VIPs. Of course, valet-parking is available in the secure underground parking facility, where a private vehicle, perhaps a well-maintained Jeep Cherokee, stands ready to whisk away into obscurity any participant involved in such a game of cat-and-mouse.
5. From Chapter 39
(United Arab Emirates – Travel Blog, entry 2)

Luckily, the heart of the country consists of three main cities connected to each other by a state-of-the-art freeway system, creating a large triangle from Abu Dhabi to Dubai running northeast along the sea, from Dubai into the southeast desert of Al Ain, and then back to Abu Dhabi due west. Each is slightly over an hour from each other. To distract yourself from the commute’s tedium, catch up on light reading, such as files and files of perplexing autopsy findings, color-coded crime scene diagrams, or newspaper articles that may have slipped past the watchful eyes of the powers that be. Better yet, fold your hands behind your head and let your guide regale you with tales of the strange and bizarre that could only be experienced in a country forged from the parched hands of nomadic, Bedouin tribes.

The next destination cuts through the clear blue sky as the only peak in the entire emirate of Abu Dhabi, standing above the surrounding sea of sand at an elevation of 4,000 feet and straddling the border to the Sultanate of Oman. Not long ago, Arabian leopards would have hunted the golden, goat-like tahr, a desert species without a mane. The sleek, long-eared Arabian wolf might have captured a swift yet doddering Houbara Bustard, a large bird that prefers running instead of using its wings. Sadly, all of these native creatures now teeter on extinction.

What are plentiful in the country, yet still out of place at the base of the Emirate’s only mountain are Filipino laborers employed in janitorial and housekeeping services. Thus, it’s strange to find the remains of one hunted and killed among the crevices. Nevertheless, strewn upon the impressive, jagged rocks of recent geological formation endures a stain so deep purple it could more easily be misconstrued as black rather than the actual red source of blood from which it came. Awaiting the rains that have not returned in more than a year to wash it away, the sanguineous vestige of a killer still covers a small portion of the mountain. Like an ancient work of art left
behind by hunters as a sign that they had once succeeded in stalking their prey, the felling of young
woman is similarly recorded here in nature’s ink.

Although minute in comparison to most massifs, many adventurers and weekend-warriors
have been forced to rely on the services of medivacs to come to the valiant rescue. If not for such
a helicopter rescue one hot day, a lone woman named Annilyn dela Cruz might never have been
found by accident, seemingly dashed upon the rocks and immediately ruled a “death by
misadventure.” Despite being told by her closest friends that Annilyn didn’t possess a single thrill-
seeking bone in her body and despite being dressed in inappropriate attire for hiking when she was
discovered, the authorities might be excused for getting caught up in the fresh, breath-taking
ambiance beneath Jebel Hafeet’s shadow. Thus, they quickly closed the case. Although her
friends didn’t put it past Annilyn to turn a trick or two out of desperation, it’s understandable that
she might not have been as sure-footed as the mighty tahr. Although she probably would have
never been here without some coaxing, maybe she was just as disinterested in taking flight in the
face of danger as the clumsy Houbara Bustard; thereby, tumbling to her death as the authorities
ruled rather than being stoned to death at the hands of a ravenous predator, which the evidence
suggested.
6. From Chapter 42

(United Arab Emirates – Travel Blog, entry 3)

Next on our quest, is the charming Deira. It is the birthplace of a city now renowned for its opulence and towering modernity. This quaint section of Dubai maintains its fishing-village heritage and is referred to as Old Dubai. Here, authentic abras (much like the working model that shuttles between the Fairmont and the Shangri-La) operate as water-taxis, zig-zagging back and forth from one side of Dubai creek to the other. Unlike the fanfare of the largest mall in the world or the architectural ingenuity of an indoor ski slope, the street markets here line alleyways much like they did in the recent past, when the country was still forming. However, the largest attraction of this oft overlooked city treasure is the Gold Souk. Narrow streets and alleyways filled with jewelers hocking gold and precious stones at or below market value attract many an affluent sightseer. But only the industrious working class actually work and live here.

However, another trade makes itself at home here in Deira among the gold-mongers, one better known as the oldest trade in the world. As the dark-skinned immigrants clutter the streets, tall, blonde-haired women dressed for a New Year’s Eve party on a Tuesday afternoon might brush past you as they exit a cab and dash into the lobby of one the many posh hotels of yesteryear that still dot the old downtown. Between these buildings in the tapered passageways that cut from street to street, thousands of emigres of every ethnicity run the gauntlet of urban oblivion. Colorful African headdresses and South Asian sarees worn by the female laborers are just as plentiful as pants rolled above sandals and tunic pajamas trademarked by the men of the working class.

Though traversing any metropolitan by way of its back alleys and side streets is ill-advised, such precaution is usually not necessary here in the virtually crimeless haven of the U.A.E. Therefore, the unusual sight of a dolled-up Ukrainian call girl resting awkwardly beside a dumpster should have sounded more vociferous alarm bells. Although the nightlife at the more-seasoned
resorts include activities, such as dancing, quiz night, and reckless alcohol consumption, mainlining narcotics, as the “strung-out junkie” was said by the authorities to have done, is an uncommon hobby for rare birds indeed.

The wounds found on her body suggested her back grated against shards of sparkling glass that littered the alley, yet they were ruled incidental markings for a woman-of-the-night who makes the street her bed. Furthermore, the light red constellation of petechial hemorrhaging found circling the beautiful blue irises of Alyona Buylko were attributed to ordinary bloodshot peepers common to people who stay up too late. Authorities said the slight discoloration of her throat could have been her beautiful, ill-fitting necklace. In fact, the press release made sure to call it a choker and even named the elite jeweler from which it was purchased.
Umm Al Duwais bloomed into existence as a thought. Djinn are different; they are not born. They unfurl into being like the scent of a flower, tangible to the senses yet unseen, without a name nor anyone to give them one.

She was a benevolent djinn conceived through mirth and good-tidings by the Bedouins attending a summer solstice celebration. Her spirit gave rise as the villagers embraced and tapped their noses together one muggy evening beneath the palms.

Her presence was recognized as a good omen, but sometimes, she would switch the laundry on the lines of quarreling neighbors, forcing them to speak to each other again to exchange their undergarments. To play matchmaker, she was accustomed to blowing a woman’s shayla from her face as she passed an eligible bachelor on the dirt path, providing fantasies for months. This was the extend of her mischievousness for hundreds of years, bringing no fear and generally admired as a noble djinn.

Sightings of her were fairly rare, but if you were lost in the thought or oblivious to your surroundings as you stood among the merchants at the market, perhaps you were daydreaming about what you might do with an extra coin in you pocket, and your eyes stood open and awake yet focused on nothing in particular, and if she, herself, was rapt in a similar state of mind, you might catch a glimpse of her in all her grandeur, going about her charitable deeds. She had hair black as a well bottom, but the tendrils did not hang around her face like human hair. It seemed to flow in the air like an aura as if an updraft kept it aloft. She clothed herself in shadows that draped off of her like long sleeves and the train of an abaya, soft and shapeless as bolts of satin. Her transparent skin was a lucky color for a djinn because its light grey tint was not too off-putting.
for mortals. Her nose was without the hook or bony bump common to the women of this area; instead, it was sharp and regal between her thin, dark eyebrows.

However, should you meet her eyes for the breadth of time it takes a granule to slide through the hourglass, she would gasp and disperse into a multitude of purplish *damas* snakes or turn into a silver mist beneath the *hawaiish* trees. From these sighting came her name, some called her *Damas* and others called her *Hawaiish*, but over time her name blended into *Umm Al Duwais*. Only a handful had ever looked directly into her catlike eyes, and those who had, forever searched the oases to gaze upon their splendor again like a prospector who catches a glint of gold in raging river and dives in to drown.

Though no one knew where she lived or if she really lived at all, to seek her out was a fool’s errand. If men or women sought a favor from her, which they often did, she was nowhere to be found. Children could find her easily because they lived without forethought like the birds and beetles. And in order for your wish to be granted, it had to come from an absence of desire, from a reluctance of ambition.

Nevertheless, villages change; respectable people pass, and their children inherit their plots and problems, and it only takes one family to taint the well. Children of such a clan run feral and play tricks on neighbors, snapping majlis tent poles, removing wagon wheel lynchpins. After some time, the pranks get darker; they become felonious, stealing chicken eggs and slaughtering baby goats that wander into their property for their tender meat.

This brings negativity and vengeance to town, which begets *djinn* of their own. Thus, a blue-tinged *djinn* spawned to life and gave himself the name, *Naahadam* the Unequaled. He began prowling the peaceful camel paths that *Umm Al Duwais* had long considered her own. Spirits born out of such animosity take the blame for mischief done by humans and reciprocate mischief in
return. As the Indian-roller eats the tail of the krait, the snake’s head turns around and envenomates the bird’s neck. The rivalry burns eternal. Humans hate djinn; djinn hate humans.

Thereby, Umm Al Duwais found herself in the company of her own kind, walking the same dimension, but, like the lecherous men who longed to stare into her lavender eyes, the newborn djinn craved what he could not taste in his ghostly form – the flesh of a woman. Day in and day out, the wretched Naahadam tried to visit Hamda, the eldest sister in the thieving clan, the only member pure of heart. But at every turn, the evil spirit ran headlong into Umm Al Duwais, who thwarted his shameless intentions. Frequenting the house so much, Umm Al Duwais could not easily hide from Hamda’s nasty brothers, who seemed to catch sight of her shapely form more and more. Nor could she hide from Naahadam. Being a djinn like her, he could see her in any form she took. So, it went, the two brothers lusted for Umm Al Duwais at first glance while Naahadam pined away for the brothers’ beautiful sister.

So devious were the brothers in tandem, they surpassed the odious nature of the djinn, and they devised a great ploy. Naahadam had been sniffing around their sister so long, they knew his way of traveling from pillar to post unseen. Unlike the fragrant lavender into which Umm Al Duwai transformed, Naahadam turned into an acrid cloud of smoke. Knowing this, they put their scheme into motion. First, they secretly sent their pretty sister on an errand, knowing Umm Al Duwais would follow at her heels. Meanwhile, Naahadam was lazing about, smoking shisha, completely unaware a plot was afoot. Then, the brothers scrambled into their sister’s room, pulled the shade, and closed the door except for a crack. The older brother hid behind it, clutching the tool by which he’d capture the djinn. At this point, the younger brother made a great announcement in his sister’s high-pitched voice that she was bathing in the washbasin and then
going straight to bed. They always felt Naahadam’s otherworldly presence when their sister was alone, so they knew he’d come around shortly.

They slammed the door shut to seal the con, certain the stinky djinn would seize any opportunity to spy on their sister naked. They readied their tools, and sure enough Naahadam slowly came through the thin crevice beneath the door in his phantom form of thick smoke. Ever so carefully, the two boys raised the handles of the fireplace bellows they had stolen. The accordion air pumps made of leather and wood were used to push concentrated air into the coals of a firepit, but the boys knew it drew in air first before it pumped it out. In a matter of seconds, they had used the bellows to suck up so much smoke that only tiny wisp remained and filled their noses with the djinn’s sulfuric stench. Quickly, they corked the tube ends from which they had suctioned in Naahaadam and jumped up for joy at having trapped the trickster. Each taking their turn so as not to let any smoke escape, they removed the cork and pumped Naahadam’s essence into a large jug.

Consequences rarely bother the criminal nor the fool, and never cross the mind of someone who is both. Likewise, the two boys could only celebrate the cleverness of their conspiracy but could not take into consideration how it might unfold in the long run. For the time being, Naahaadam the Unequaled, was forced to break the dimensional plane and ask for a parley. In a muffled voice, he beckoned them to put their ears to the murky glass. The djinn wasted to time. Knowing they wanted something in exchange for his freedom, he discovered the brothers were intent on viewing Umm Al Duwais in all her glory, to look upon her as he would look upon her.

Why stop there? the djinn coaxed them on. When you have a djinn in a bottle, you don’t ask for a sip of water! You demand the entire reservoir!
They couldn’t have agreed more. The two brutes negotiated an ironclad deal that if they could each have their way with the beautiful *Umm Al Duwais*, they would set him free, but *Nahaadam* had one more stipulation: He, too, would get to spend some time with their innocent sister. Convinced the *djinn* could do no real damage considering his ethereal state of matter, they readily agreed to throw their sister into the bargain. Now, *Nahaadam* was lecherous and smelly but was no fool; he had a scam of his own.

“**Young men,**” the sound of his voice vibrated through the big round jug, “**in order for you to seduce a *djinn*, you must know the ways of *djinn*, which means you must be a *djinn*.**”

The younger boy asked astutely, “**How do we do that?**”

“It’s quite easy, you simply uncork the bottle, press your lips to the brim, and inhale.”

“That’s it?” asked the older brother.

The *djinn* said, “**Once I am inside you, you will see as I see; you will feel as I feel,**” but the younger boy didn’t believe it. Before he could snatch away the jug, his older brother had unplugged the mouth and sucked all the smoke deep into his lungs. Immediately, his skin turned a sickly bluish-green like that of a seasick man. His eyes narrowed and he bellowed out a menacing laugh. The little brother did not know with whom he shared the room, his brother or the *djinn*? Maybe both? In fact, it is the *djinn*’s forte to inhabit men and control their bodies if they are invited in.

The little brother asked, “**Bakhit, is that you?**”

The *djinn* answered in Bakhit’s voice, “**Of course it’s me. We had a deal, and *djinn* never welch.**”

The little brother let out a sigh, “**Shew, I thought he tricked us.**”

“No, no, no. He’s inside of me sharing his eyes, and I am sharing mine.”
“What can you see?” asked the younger.

“I can see everything, like looking through a spyglass. I can see Jannah when I look up, and I can see Jahimu burning below.”

“Tomorrow,” the second brother said with perverse glee, “I will feel his power, too.”

“Yes, tomorrow you will see what has been done.” Then, Nahaadam set about in earnest to fulfill his desire by ravaging the maiden of the house. Summarily, Hamda and her djinn returned from their errand none the wiser. Umm Al Duwais, not recognizing the possession of the young brute, thought it was safe to leave Hamda for the evening and wandered among the dunes to count the stars. Meantime, the hidden djinn convinced the younger brother to go to bed and await his turn the next day while he followed Umm Al Duwais out into the desert to claim their part of the bargain. She was easy to follow using the mystical sight djinn possessed, but when he drew near her, he pretended she was invisible to his mortal eyes. She watched the rude adolescent approach with the same disdain she offered him around the home. He cried out, “Umm Al Duwaish, Umm Al Duwaish, where are you?” but she continued to lay there upon the slope of the dunes, her donkey hooves planted in the cool sand, legs spread languorously, and the sickles of her fingers tallying the sparkles in the sky without a care for this interloper. She would let him get as close to her as possible without allowing him to step on her, and then she would blow dust in his eyes.

Like a blind man addressing the nobody next to you when speaking, Naahadam shouted over her head, “Where are you, Umm Al Duwais? We need you? Our sister has taken ill!” At this revelation, she looked up, her attention piqued. She arose from her tranquil position and turned her back to fly to Hamda when she found herself seized by the hands of the djinn and felt his volcanic breath on her neck. She realized instantly she had been duped by Naahadam. She struggled to get free, but the combined strength of both planes was too much for her. She was
throttled and mounted like a prostitute on her first day of enslavement. She couldn’t believe
*Naahadam* had broken so many codes of honor between the creatures of the ether. Indignation
and revenge burned within her before she died at the hands of her own kin.

At least *Naahadam* thought she was dead, but the only thing the fool had done was kill her
trust in the humanity that had invited him in, was kill her resolve to leave human matters relatively
unscathed, was kill every drop of kindness in her body. It fell from her eyes as dew on the desert
plants and disappeared into the parched earth. In a malaise, she came back to life, collected herself,
and flared to the homestead in a display of rage. There she found she was too late. Hamda was
strewn about and disheveled along with the straw of her bed, ravaged and strangled to death just
like she, too, had been murdered only moments ago. Next to Hamda, lay her dismantled brother,
their father having lopped of his head with a scimitar he kept at his bedside. The incestual scene
he encountered when he hurried towards the dying gasps of his daughter in the middle of the night
left him no choice but slaughter. There, too, was *Naahadam*, enjoying the tragedy he had set in
motion until he saw *Umm Al Duwais* enter, a ghost of a ghost. Terrified, the blue *djinn* turned to
smoke and fled into the panting father’s mouth as he cursed the entire world, the hatred inviting
him in. But as a possessed mortal, it also made him susceptible to the unearthly blades of *Umm
Al Duwais*. She slashed the father’s body to ribbons, cutting out the hedonistic spirit inside of him.
The astonished younger brother was left to witness *Umm Al Duwais* in her complete form, hooved
feet attached to the bent hind legs of a donkey, scythes for hands, and eyes that glowed purple with
madness.

To this day, should lust take your heart at the sight of a beautiful stranger, and you feel it is your
right, your privilege, to follow her, you have allowed a sinful *djinn* to possess you. Then, you may
discover *Umm Al Duwais* in all her horrifying beauty was the one you chased and she will take revenge on your pitiless desire by devouring your flesh.
Curriculum Vita

Jason Michael Palomo is a native of El Paso, TX where he attended the University of Texas at El Paso for two years of undergraduate studies before transferring to Eugene Lang College of the New School University in New York City. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Writing, Literature, and Arts. He has worked as an English teacher in Seoul, South Korea, Brooklyn, NY, El Paso, TX, and Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. He is the proud husband and father of two lovely children and two family dogs.