

Intercept

by

Thom Tate

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Chapter 1

Vienna, Austria

01:19 (23:19 GMT)

July 18th

The rain had stopped more than an hour ago, but Solomon could hear the water dripping down the gutters just outside the open window. It was late, she was tired, and she'd been waiting for nearly twelve hours. She'd chosen a room on an empty floor of a multi-purpose building in the Griechengasse, a small shopping area that catered mostly to tourists. Below were apartments, small shops and restaurants, the kind that put out spinning postcard holders on the sidewalk and invited customers in with the sound of traditional Bavarian music and the smell of fresh pretzels. The conditions weren't ideal, but she'd been in far worse. From her vantage point, she could make out the entire front of the Hotel Austria across the street. The location where her mark would arrive.

She spit out the last of her fingernail, a nervous habit that she knew was bad, but had no intention of breaking. To squelch the combination of butterflies and hunger, she walked over to a wooden crate she'd been using as a table and opened up the Styrofoam container that had been sitting there for hours. Rigor mortis had set in on the remnant of her sandwich. What was once hot was now cool and the cold fruit salad was room temperature. Her stomach growled and Solomon devoured her left-overs.

She put down her fork as she finished eating the last of the warm fruit and she cringed after washing it down with cold coffee.

Eughh!

The sound of splashing water, forced out beneath rolling tires, alerted her. She picked up her M89SR sniper rifle and chambered a round as she quickly stepped over to the window. Three vehicles: one black Mercedes sedan flanked by two silver Range Rovers. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and her nervousness was pushed away by an overwhelming feeling of confidence. This was it. The wait was over.

Two blocks down and around the corner sat a white Citroën panel van— outfitted to look like a Deutsche Telekom utility truck. It was decked out with ladders and tools of the trade. Orange cones had been laid on the road to further disguise its true intent as the men waited for their spotter to return. The door to the van slid open and Marid Kanaan stepped inside, slightly out of breath and soaking wet.

“They're pulling up now.”

“How many?” asked Abir.

“I do not know, but there are three vehicles.”

Abir Mammeri was not a tall man, but what he lacked in stature, he made up for with passion.

He backhanded Marid across the face. “You fool! How are we supposed to do this if we do not know what we're up against?”

“I am sorry, Abir, I can go back and—”

“No! It is too late for that. Allah is on our side and he will see to it that we are victorious.”

Abir was the nephew of Mohamed Alzahabi, the leader of the now-infamous Ansar al-Sharia extremist group. Abir had been raised by him since he was three, after his father was killed. In the early eighties, President Reagan had ordered any Libyan plane that ventured beyond the “Line of Death”, an imaginary line that extended twelve miles off the coast of Libya, to be shot down. Abir’s father, a Libyan fighter pilot, had been shot down by two F-14 Tomcats when he had ventured beyond it. As a result, Abir fell into the hands of his extremist Uncle and his hatred of the West was formed.

Abir said a short prayer for the success of their mission and to protect the lives of his four-man team. The men pulled black masks over their heads and chambered rounds into their weapons. Abir tapped the driver on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Solomon brought the scope of her rifle up to her eye and fixed on her target. Mohsen Fallahi, whose work on uranium enrichment in the upper echelons of Iran’s nuclear program had been compared to that of Robert Oppenheimer’s in the 1940s, with respect to its audacity and scope. In 2006, Fallahi had fallen off the grid and had been presumed dead.

The re-emergence of Fallahi and the stall of diplomatic efforts to contain Iran’s nuclear program were what had instigated Mossad to act. It was up to Solomon to eliminate the bastard before he could start.

With both eyes open, she kept a fix on the back of the Mercedes sedan, her right eye peering through her scope. Solomon placed her finger on the trigger. Four men exited each of the Range Rovers while the doors of the Mercedes remained closed. Two of the eight men approached the passenger side rear door. The back door facing Solomon opened and a large bald man exited and walked to the rear of the car and opened the trunk.

Dammit!

Solomon removed her finger from the trigger and looked out across the street. The trunk was now blocking her view and a slight wave of panic washed over her as she feared she wouldn’t be able to get a clean shot. The man removed a bag from the trunk and closed it. Solomon settled down, looked back through her scope and placed her finger back on the trigger.

The rear passenger door opened and Mohsen Fallahi stepped out of the car. Solomon put her crosshairs in the dead center of Fallahi’s head. She took a deep breath, held it-

Machine gun fire shattered the quiet of the night and startled Solomon. The result was that her shot went far left and ripped through the chest of one of the bodyguards. Solomon looked on in disbelief as a lone Citroën van squealed to a stop in front of the hotel. Solomon watched as two of Fallahi’s bodyguards surrounded him and pushed him inside the hotel to escape the mayhem. The remaining guards drew their own weapons and returned fire. The first guard sent a five-round burst up the first man’s chest, four of the bullets hitting him in the torso and the fifth his head, blowing out the back of his skull.

Another man jumped out of the opposite side of the van and took cover behind the rear door. He looked briefly at the now- dead terrorist. He yelled to the driver, “They’ve taken him inside! Go and get him!”

The driver crouched down to avoid the barrage that was being sent their way from the body guards. The man who appeared to be the leader and another man laid down covering fire so the driver could get across the street. The driver reached the sidewalk behind the second Range

Rover. He fired his AK-47 and shot one of the guards in the knee, sending him to the pavement screaming in pain while the bullets tore through the neck of the other guard. Adjacent to him and out of his peripheral view was an unmarked staff exit from the hotel. The door opened and one of Fallahi's bodyguards stepped out. The man in charge yelled, "On your right!"

The guard pulled his .45 pistol and shot the driver through the head. The bullet exited his skull and shattered the back passenger door window. Solomon could see blood and grey matter as it splattered on the inside of the remaining windows as she watched through the scope of her rifle.

"Nazir! Go around to the other side, in front of the vehicles! I'll cover you," yelled the leader.

Solomon watched as the two men conversed. The power of her scope allowed her to see the fear in the third man's eyes. The leader said something to him and reached out and touched his arm. She couldn't make out what he said, but whatever it was, she noticed the change in the man's demeanor— from fear to determination.

The third man got up and ran across the street and around the front of the small motorcade. Solomon saw the two guards were crouching behind the Mercedes for cover. She watched the third of the four man team head to the front of the lead car but knew the guards were expecting him. As soon as he rounded the front of the Range Rover, both guards unleashed a fury of lead that shredded the man's body. Solomon and the lead terrorist watched the man fall into a lump of dead flesh onto the sidewalk. The draining rainwater created a small crimson river down the side of the curb as he bled out.

The terrorist leader stepped out from the van door that was providing him protection. He opened fire on the two guards. He screamed as he emptied the clip in his weapon. He managed to kill only one of the two guards who were left outside. The second bodyguard raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. It misfired. He reached into his jacket and retrieved his sidearm. He walked out onto the street toward the leader, who stood frozen, facing the approaching threat. Suddenly, he shifted into motion, feeling into his vest for another full clip as the last guard walked towards him, but it was in vain. The bodyguard pulled up his pistol and aimed it at the man's head.

A lone silent shot tore through the guard's chest and left a gaping hole the size of a grapefruit as it exited his back.

Stunned, the lone terrorist leader turned around and looked toward Solomon, but she had hidden in the darkness of the empty room.

Still watching the man, Solomon put down her weapon. She stayed in the shadows but moved to get a better look out the window. She watched the man jump into the van and speed away. Two more guards came back out from inside the hotel and fired their weapons harmlessly in the van's direction as it rounded the corner a block away. The sound of sirens filled the air as Solomon looked at the carnage that was now on the street three levels down. *What in the hell just happened?*

Chapter 2

Benghazi, Libya
07:50 (05:50 GMT)

July 18th

Mohamed Alzahabi disconnected the call and violently swept his arm across the table. The pot of coffee, three small cups and a .45 pistol went crashing to the floor. Only the Koran remained still. The sixty-four year old leader of Ansar al-Sharia was not a happy man.

The Ansar al-Sharia, whose name meant “Partisans of Islamic Law,” was an Islamic militia group that advocated the implementation of strict Sharia law across Libya. After a massive anti-militia rally in Benghazi that left the American Embassy destroyed and its ambassador dead, the Ansar al-Sharia had agreed to disband. However, frustrated former leaders, realizing that they still had devoted followers, decided to bring the group back together and rebuild in silence until they were strong enough to again advance their cause.

The problem the group had was twofold: funding and man power. Most of their funding had run out and they were operating on sparse donations. With funding, they could get the recruits that they needed: if they fixed the first issue, the second would take care of itself.

That’s where Mohsen Fallahi came into the picture. The plan was to kidnap Fallahi and ransom him off to the highest bidder: al-Qaeda, Hamas, or even the Iranians; they didn’t care. The money they hoped to get would be enough to fund their cause for months, if not years.

After the uprising against them, they had been forced to abandon their former headquarters and take up in a run-down part of Benghazi. The three-story, mud-packed building was rotting from the roof down. Portions of the roof had collapsed and when it did rain, which wasn’t often, the water would trickle down through the top floor and eventually find the second story room where Alzahabi made his office. The room was dirty and sparse, save for a desk and three chairs.

Zafar Kattan, Alzahabi’s right hand man, was startled by the crash and dashed into the room. “Brother, what is it?”

“It is Abir! He has failed to retrieve Fallahi. They underestimated his protection and all his men are dead. If he were not my nephew, I would kill him myself for such incompetence!”

“What are we going to do?”

“I will send more men. *You* are going to lead them.”

“Me? But I don’t have the—”

Alzahabi reached down and picked up the .45, chambering a round as he brought his arm up. He pointed it at Zafar’s face. “You will do as you are told! Do not make me tell you again or I will send you to Allah right now!”

Zafar raised his hands; his eyes were wide with fear.

“Yes, yes, of course, brother. When would you like me to leave?”

“Now!” Alzahabi lowered his arm, flipped on the safety, and tossed the .45 on the desk. “Take six men with you.” He then bent down under his desk, opened his safe and withdrew a stack of passports and thirty thousand dollars cash. He thumbed through the passports and carefully chose six for the men, plus one for Zafar.

“Go. *Bissalama.*”

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Cruising at 45,000 feet over France at six hundred miles per hour, Special Agent Blake MacKay sat in the back of the Gulfstream 450 and relaxed while he traveled back to Langley. He’d just finished writing his brief on his mission in Croatia.

Blake put on his headphones, made a selection on his iPod and leaned back on the leather couch. Uncomfortable, he leaned forward and was reaching behind himself to adjust the pillow when he noticed a “Breaking News” flash on the television. He took off his headphones, reached for the remote and turned up the volume. Fifteen seconds of information was all that he needed to hear. He got up and walked to the front of the plane.

“We need to turn around. Now!”

The pilot looked at his co-pilot, then back up to Blake. “Okay, where we going?”

“Vienna.”