

COLD KILL FIRST CHAPTER

The American folded his arms and watched without emotion as the electrodes were applied to the man's genitals. 'Tell us who gave you the satellite photographs,' said the American. 'Tell us and this will all be over.' He was wearing a lightweight headset, a silver-grey earpiece with a small curved mouthpiece attached.

The two torturers on the other side of the two-way mirror were wearing similar headsets. They were in their early thirties with hard eyes and close-cropped haircuts. They wore dark sweatshirts with the sleeves pulled up to the elbows, jeans and heavy workboots. The one attaching the electrodes had a broken nose, the other, standing by a table at the far end of the room, had a thick scar above his lip.

Broken Nose repeated the American's words.

The man in the plastic chair was in his early thirties. He hadn't shaved in three days and he had been fed infrequently with low-protein meals. His eyes were sunken with dark patches underneath and his black hair was matted and unkempt.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said the man.

Scarred Lip picked up a photograph off the table and waved it in front of the man's face. It was one of several satellite pictures that had been found in the man's apartment. Photographs of RAF Mildenhall, a base for bombers and tanker aircraft of the United States Air Force and headquarters of the 352nd Special Operations Group. It was in Suffolk in the south of England, and it was a prime target. There could be no justifiable reason for a civilian having the high-definition satellite images in their possession. Especially a civilian who had circled with black ink all the CCTV cameras that covered the base perimeter.

'Who gave you the pictures?' said the American quietly.

Broken Nose repeated the question, word for word, but in a staccato scream, his mouth just inches from the bound man's ear.

'You can't do this!' shouted the man. He had a Manchester accent. He had been wearing a Manchester United shirt when he'd been dragged into the basement but he was naked now. He struggled but the men who had tied him to the chair were professionals and the webbing straps held him tight.

'Yes we can,' said Scarred Lip.

'I'm a British citizen, I've got rights.'

'Not here you haven't,' said Broken Nose. 'This is American soil. You've got no rights here.'

'I didn't do anything!' screamed the man, spittle spraying from his lips.

'That's a lie,' said the Broken Nose. 'And you know what happens when you lie. Now, who gave you the photographs?'

'We know what you were planning,' Scarred Lip. He threw the photographs back onto the table. 'All we need to know is who was helping you.'

The man shook his head. He closed his eyes and shuddered in anticipation of the pain to come.

The American sighed. 'Do it,' he said softly.

Behind the chair was a foot pedal that connected the electrodes to the high-voltage batteries that would provide the charge. Direct current was much more painful than the mains alternating current. The American knew that from experience. Broken Nose put his foot on the pedal and the man went into spasm. Broken Nose kept his foot down for a full two seconds, then released it. The man sagged in the chair, gasping for breath. His body was bathed in sweat. 'Again,' said the American.

Broken Nose stamped on the pedal again. The man went rigid, his back arched like a bow, his mouth wide open in a silent scream. Urine pooled around the chair as the man wet himself.

This time the current stayed on for a full five seconds. When Broken Nose took his foot off the pedal, the man shuddered and then went still.

Scarred Lip walked over and checked for a pulse in the neck. He nodded. The man was still alive. Unconscious but alive.

'Let's take a break,' said the American.

The two torturers grinned. Scarred Lip flashed the American a thumbs-up.

The American removed the headset and placed it on the table. He left the room, walking past two marines with loaded carbines, and took the stairs up to the ground floor. He swiped his security card through the reader and tapped his entry code into the keyboard. The door led to a long corridor that took him by storerooms and shredding rooms to a second security door. He swiped his card again and tapped in another four-digit code. The door opened into the main staff entrance where two more armed marines stood guard. Both marines looked straight ahead as the American walked by.

The American walked out into the sunshine. It was eleven o'clock, a fresh spring day. He stood looking out over the square, enjoying the cool breeze that played across his face. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It felt good to be out of the basement. The basement stank of sweat and urine and fear. The American had been born on a farm and he'd always hated confined spaces. He walked along the metal fence to the gatehouse and showed his ID to the armed policeman standing there. The policeman flashed him a bored smile and opened the gate. Across the square, two policemen wearing flak jackets and cradling carbines watched him walk through the gate and past the statue of General Eisenhower.

He walked away from the fortress-like building behind him, surrounded by the blocks of concrete and metal barriers that prevented terrorists getting car bombs getting close to their target. Americans had enemies around the world, enemies who would love to wreak havoc on a high-profile embassy. Embassies didn't come more high profile than the one in London's Grosvenor Square.

The American liked London. It was a civilised city with good restaurants, a vibrant theatre district, and well-tended parks. It was an expensive city, but as the American's employers took care of all his expenses, the high cost of living wasn't an issue.

He headed down Upper Brook Street, past two more armed policemen standing by a white Landrover. The British made a big deal about their police

force not being armed, but it seemed to the American that every policeman he came across had a gun these days. He smiled and nodded as he walked by, but they just stared at him stonily. Everyone was a potential threat these days, even a white, middle-aged male. It was his regular walk whenever he wanted to clear his head and his lungs. Down Park Lane to Hyde Park Corner and then a stroll through the park to the Serpentine. He'd stop off for a coffee at the café there and sit and watch the swans glide by, then he'd read the features pages of the International Herald Tribune. But eventually it would be back to the basement. And back to work.

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It was difficult to believe that she was a man. Tall, leggy, with a model's face and breasts that were barely contained by the little black dress that was all she was wearing, she was dancing around a silver pole on a small podium in front of a beer bar packed with tourists, male and female. Alen sipped his mineral water and tried to avoid eye contact. The Thai ladyboys were predatory in the extreme and a simple sidelong glance would result in one sitting at his side, massaging his upper thigh and asking him for a drink or offering a quick trip to a short-time hotel. There were more than a dozen of the ladyboys working the tourists, all of them tall and lovely. Several were wearing Father Christmas hats and had trimmed their dresses with tinsel. The tourists were mainly British and German, middle-aged and overweight, the single guys flirting with the ladyboys, the married ones sneaking furtive looks whenever they thought their wives weren't watching. Every few minutes a ladyboy would leave with a customer, high heels clicking on the pavement, swinging her hips and flicking her hair in triumph. Alen wondered if the men knew that they were going off for sex with a transsexual. Or if they cared.

The road throbbed with the beats of a dozen sound systems, all competing with one another. Tourists sat at roadside beer bars, knocking back bottles of Singha and Chang beer and fondling girls half their age. Young Thai men in tight-fitting jeans lounged on gleaming motorcycles and smoked cigarettes as they watched their wives and girlfriends ply their trade.

Alen felt a tug at his shoulder. A small dark-skinned girl with impossibly large eyes was looking up at him. She thrust a handful of roses up at him. Each flower had been carefully wrapped in polythene. 'Twenty baht,' she said. The girl couldn't have been more than eight years old.

'Where is your mother, child?' asked Alen.

The girl pointed off to the right. A woman with skin the colour and texture of leather was standing at the side of the road with an armful of plastic-wrapped roses. She wore a brightly coloured headscarf and had large gold hooped earrings. She grinned at Alen showing a mouthful of blackened teeth.

'Twenty baht,' repeated the girl, pushing the flowers closer to Alen's face.

'Don't encourage them,' said the girl sitting next to Alen. She was in her mid-twenties with shoulder-length blonde hair that blew around her face in the draft from the wall-mounted fan. She spoke in Bosnian. Her second language, and

Alen's too. Anna had been born in Italy, to an Italian mother and a Bosnian father. 'If no one bought from them, they wouldn't use the kids,' said Anna.

'And if they didn't work, maybe they wouldn't eat,' said Alen. 'Did you think of that?' He also had mixed parentage. His mother was Polish, his father was Russian, but his father had left before Alen had been born. Alen and Anna had met in Sarajevo. They had a lot in common. They had lived together for the last three years and if everything went as planned they would die together.

Anna ruffled the child's hair. 'She should be home asleep at night, not hanging around with prostitutes and whoremongers.'

'It's Christmas Day,' said Alen, his voice loaded with sarcasm. 'Where is your Christmas spirit?'

Anna snorted and turned away from him.

Alen pulled a rose from the girl's hand and gave it to Anna. Anna took it, and laughed at his stupidity. Alen gave the girl two ten-baht coins and winked at her. She ran over to her mother and gave her the money.

'You are too soft, Alen,' said Anna.

'You know that's not true,' said Alen. 'You of all people know that.'

There were two dozen or so beer bars in the complex off Bangla Road, a hundred yards or so from Patong Beach, Phuket's busiest beach. There were more than five hundreds prostitutes working in the bars, a fair number of them transsexuals, but even at ten o'clock at night there were a large number of families around. Alen took another sip of his mineral water. He would take no pleasure in killing children, but it was the will of Allah that the bombs be placed where they would do the most damage and if the infidels chose to bring their children to a place of prostitution, then so be it.

He nodded at Anna. She smiled at him, Like him, she was drinking mineral water. 'Happy?' he said.

'Perfect,' she replied. 'Merry Christmas. And thank you for my rose.'

Alen clinked his glass against hers. 'Merry Christmas,' he said loudly. He leaned across the table and planted a kiss on her cheek. She smelled of lemons and camomile. Her shampoo. 'Allahu Akbar,' whispered Alen.

'Allahu Akbar,' echoed Anna. God is great.

* * *

Alen and Anna stayed in Bangla Road until the bars closed. They visited a half a dozen bars but drank nothing stronger than mineral water. They saw other Muslims drinking alcohol and walking off with prostitutes, but their faces didn't betray the contempt they felt. Breaking the rules of Islam would bring its own reward. Alen and Anna walked arm in arm, laughing and smiling like any other holidaying couple, but their eyes were ever watchful. It was the small details that would make or break their operation. Where were the police? How heavy was the traffic? What time did the shops close? The bars? Were the streets busy, did pedestrians walk down the middle of the road or stick to the pavements? Alen and Anna watched and committed everything to memory.

They walked down to the beach road where they had parked their blue Suzuki Jeep. Alen drove the short distance to the resort where they had been staying for the past three weeks. He drove up to their beach bungalow and parked on the cracked concrete strip by the door. The waves lapped the shore in the distance and the palm trees that surrounded the resort whispered in the night breeze.

They climbed out of the Jeep. Alen knocked on the door. Three quick knocks. Two slow knocks. Two quick taps with the flat of his hand. It opened, the security chain in place. Pale grey eyes squinted at Alen, then the door was closed, the chain removed and the door opened again. His name was Norbert and at thirty-five he was the oldest of the group. He was wearing a red polo shirt and blue jeans that he'd bought at a roadside stall that morning. His nose and forehead were sunburnt and glistening with after-sun lotion. 'Okay?' asked Norbert.

'Busy,' said Alen. 'The bars are packed.' He spoke in Bosnian. Norbert had been born in Luxemburg but like Anna and Alen he was fluent in Bosnian.

Another man came out of the bedroom, his hair still wet from the shower. 'Tomorrow? Definitely tomorrow?' His name was Emir. He was the only one of the four to have been born in Bosnia.

'Tomorrow,' said Alen. He went through to the second bedroom and pulled a grey Samsonite suitcase from under one of the two beds. He opened the case and took out a rolled-up sheet of thick paper. He took it into the sitting room. Emir and Anna had dropped down onto a bamboo sofa. Norbert helped Alen unroll the paper and weigh the corners down with saucers from the kitchen. They all peered at the hand-drawn map. Alen ran his finger along Bangla Road. 'It is busy all day, but more so after eight pm,' he said. 'The bars shut at one. The best time will be at midnight.' Alen tapped a square some two-thirds of the way down the road. 'The first device will be here,' he said. 'Outside the Ocean Plaza Department store. The store is always busy. Nearby are dozens of parked motorcycles which will add to the explosion. Immediately after the explosion there will be panic. Most people will rush down the street towards the beach road. He tapped the bar area where he had earlier been drinking with Anna. 'The second device will be detonated here precisely two minutes later. The street should be full and we will achieve maximum impact.' He smiled at Anna. They would be responsible for the second device.

Norbert took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'Allahu akbar,' he said.

'Allahu akbar,' echoed his three companions.

Alen straightened up. 'Any questions?'

Three shaking heads. They all knew what had to be done, and why they were doing it. All were prepared to give their lives to the jihad.

Alen went through to the first bedroom. It was larger than the second bedroom but had identical twin beds. The beds had been pushed to the side to give them room to work. One hundred and fifty kilos of Semtex had been packed inside metal petrol cans, along with handfuls of nails, screws and washers they had obtained from an ironmonger in Bangkok. More ironmongery had been taped around the fuel cans. The Semtex had been

manufactured in Czechoslovakia and shipped to Libya during the late eighties. The Libyans sold a batch of the explosive to the Provisional Irish Republican Army a few years later and it arrived in Dublin on a Spanish freighter. The consignment was split into four lots. The first batch to be used was taken to London and formed the heart of a massive bomb that ripped through London's financial centre in April 1993, killing one man and causing more than a billion pounds of damage.

The remainder of the Semtex had remained hidden for three years, then a batch was again taken to London and was used to detonate a half-tonne fertiliser-based bomb left near the South Quay Station on the Docklands Light Railway. The massive bomb had ripped through Docklands killing one man and injuring thirty-nine others and marked the end of a 17-month IRA ceasefire.

Four months later and another batch of the Semtex was used to destroy a busy shopping centre in Manchester, injuring more than two hundred shoppers. It was only because the IRA had issued a warning in advance of the explosion that no one was killed. There would be no warning when the two bombs exploded in Bangla Road. Alen and his three colleagues were aiming to kill as many people as possible. It was only when the images of death and destruction were flashed around the world that policies would be changed and that the West would learn that it was time to treat the Muslim world with respect and not contempt.

The rest of the Semtex lay buried in a graveyard in Galway throughout the nineties, under a tombstone marking the last resting place of an eighty-three-year-old Catholic priest. In the wake of the Good Friday Agreement, the IRA High Command decided to rid itself of the explosive stockpile and they sold it to a Bosnian gangster who put it in a false compartment in the floor of a container and shipped it to Sarajevo. It lay hidden in a warehouse on the outskirts of the city until Alen had bought it with a suitcase filled with Euros, still in their bank wrappers. The explosive went overland, past the country where it had been manufactured almost thirty years earlier, and onwards to Thailand. Bribes were paid where necessary, and the truck carrying the deadly cargo arrived in Phuket without once having being examined by a Customs officer.

Norbert and Erin appeared in the doorway as Alen knelt and examined the petrol cans. He nodded his approval. 'Good work,' he said.

Norbert and Erin smiled, pleased at the compliment. 'What about the detonators?' asked Norbert.

'Tomorrow,' said Alen. 'They arrive tomorrow. Insha-Allah.'

Insha-Allah. God-willing.

* * *

The Saudi walked along the beach, enjoying the cool early-morning sea breeze. A well-muscled Thai man in a tight-fitting t-shirt jogged barefoot towards him, his feet slapping on the wet sand. He smiled at the Saudi. It was the smile of a

hooker searching for a client and the Saudi looked away, more angry than embarrassed.

The Saudi was wearing a cheap cotton shirt, baggy cotton pants, cheap plastic sandals, Ray-Ban sunglasses and he was carrying a knitted shoulder bag embroidered with elephants. There were no vendors on the beach, it was too early for that. Once the tourists started heading down to the beach, the vendors would come, their skin burnt black from years touting their wares under the unforgiving sun. Cheap towels, sarongs, cooked ears of corn, plastic toys from China, laminated maps of Thailand, a sunbathing tourist would be lucky to get a couple of minutes peace before the next vendor blocked his sun.

The Saudi walked away from the sea, heading for the beach road. There were a few rusting red tuk-tuks parked in front of a low-rise hotel, the drivers looking at him expectantly, but he avoided eye contact. It seemed that every Thai he met in Phuket wanted to part him from his money. Indians in long-sleeve shirts called out to him whenever he walked by their tailor shops, bargirls smiled suggestively, stallholders would call out for him to 'take a look please.' He had only been in Phuket for eighteen hours but he had been propositioned in one form or another at least fifty times. He found it wearisome to be constantly shaking his head.

He had driven down from Bangkok in a rented Toyota Corolla, because after the bombs had exploded the police would check all flights in to and out of the island. He had checked into the Hilton Hotel on Patong Beach, a hotel favoured by tourists from the Middle East. He had dined alone in the hotel's outdoor restaurant surrounded by Arab families, the women swathed in traditional black tent-like burkhas, the children running around unsupervised, the men huddled in groups over glasses of sweet tea.

Later in the evening he had walked by the resort where Alen and his three colleagues were staying. He had sat at a beer bar overlooking the resort and sipped a 7Up and played a stupid dice game with a bargirl while he satisfied himself that no one else had the resort under observation. He had seen Alen and Anna get into the Jeep and drive off to Bangla Road. No one had followed them. The Saudi had waited for half an hour or so and then he had flagged down a tuk-tuk and sat in the back as it rattled down the beach road. The Saudi had rung the bell and climbed out at the intersection with Bangla Road. He spent the evening keeping Alen and Anna under surveillance, sipping soft drinks and ignoring the advances of the young girls who kept assuring him that he was a handsome man and that they wanted to go back to his hotel with him. The Saudi had no interest in paying for sex, at least not in Thailand. The Thai girls with their brown skin and snub noses held no attraction for the Saudi. He happily paid for female companionship in London or New York, but he preferred leggy blondes, ideally in pairs. He had waited until Alen and Anna had left Bangla Road before walking back to the Hilton. He had slept a dreamless sleep, confident that everything was going to plan.

As the Saudi walked through the bungalows, he smiled to himself. The operation had been six months in the planning, and now it was all coming to fruition. The key to its success had been the three men and the woman who

were holed up in the pretty bungalow with its steeply slanted roof and teak deck overlooking the sea. Since the attack on the World Trade Towers in New York, Arabs all around the world had been regarded with suspicion, whether or not they were Muslims. The Saudi had seen the nervous way fellow passengers looked at him whenever he boarded a plane. All Arabs were potential terrorists; anyone from the Middle East was capable of slashing a stewardess or grabbing the controls from the pilot or setting fire to his explosive-filled shoes. Arabs were scrutinised at check-in desks, at airport security, at hotels, they were all innocent until proven guilty, to be locked up in Guantanamo Bay or Belmarsh Prison and denied their basic human rights. It was hard enough for the Saudi to move around the world, and he had the luxury of a British passport and a public school accent. For the foot soldiers of al-Qaeda, post 9/11, it was almost impossible to operate in the West without attracting attention. What the organisation needed was terrorists who didn't look like terrorists. It needed terrorists who looked like Westerners; fair-haired, white-skinned Muslims who would be prepared to die for Islam, who would embrace martyrdom and die with smiles on their faces. The Saudi had found such men. And women. Found them and arranged for them to be trained. Now they were ready to give their lives for the jihad.

The Saudi took a mobile from his bag and tapped out a number. It rang three times before Alen answered. 'Our meeting for tomorrow is still on schedule?' said the Saudi.

'The following day would be better,' said Alen, in accented English. It was a prearranged phrase that meant that everything was as it should be. If the operation had been compromised then Alen would simply have agreed with him.

'Excellent,' said the Saudi. He ended the call. He walked slowly around the resort until he was satisfied that there was no surveillance, then he went over to the door of the beach bungalow and knocked on the door. Three quick knocks. Two slow knocks. Two quick taps with the flat of his hand.

The door opened and Alen embraced the Saudi as he stepped inside, kissing him on both cheeks. 'Allahu Akbar,' said Alen.

'Allahu Akbar,' said the Saudi, kicking off his sandals 'You are prepared?'

'We are all prepared,' said Alen.

They spoke in English. Their common language. The common language of terrorists around the world.

Anna, Norbert and Erin stood at the entrance to the second bedroom, smiling nervously. None of them had met the Saudi before, but they knew of him.

The Saudi went over and embraced them one by one. 'Allahu Akbar,' he said as he held them. 'God is great.'

'We have tea,' said Anna.

'I cannot stay,' said the Saudi. 'But thank you.'

He sat down on the bamboo sofa and removed a plastic-wrapped package from his bag. He laid it on the coffee table and carefully unwrapped it. Inside were six pencil-sized metal tubes with plastic-coated wires attached. He placed them one by one onto the table. The detonators had been brought into the

country by a pilot with Emirate Airlines who had helped the Saudi before. Pilots, especially senior pilots with more than twenty years experience, were really searched, but even so the detonators had been well-hidden in a false compartment of his flight case. The Saudi met the pilot in the Shangri-la hotel, overlooking the Chaoya Pra River. They had coffee and cake and made small talk, then the Saudi left with the detonators and the pilot sat with an envelope containing one hundred thousand dollars in crisp, new notes.

‘Use three per vehicle,’ said the Saudi. ‘Where are the circuits?’

Alen nodded at the bedroom. ‘In there,’ he said.

The Saudi nodded. He eased himself up off the sofa and padded through to the bedroom. He gave the explosive-filled fuel cans a cursory glance. The wiring circuits were laid out on the two beds. He studied them carefully. Two batteries in each circuit. Two on-off switches, either of which would complete the circuit. Complete redundancy was essential. They could not afford a mistake, at any level. There were flashlight bulbs that could be used to test the circuit. The Saudi checked all four on-off switches. All worked perfectly.

He went back into the sitting room. The four Shahids looked at him expectantly. ‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘You have done well.’

The Shahids were the front-line warriors of the jihad, the martyrs who would give their lives for Islam. The Koran promised the Shahids unlimited sex with 72 black-eyed virgins. The Koran said that martyrs went straight to heaven and that places would be saved for seventy of their relatives. There would be 80,000 servants to take care of them. And they would get to see the face of Allah himself. The Saudi didn’t believe that, of course. And neither did the four Shahids in the room. But they were nonetheless prepared to die.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ they said in unison.

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Nine kilometres below the white-flecked waves of the Andaman Sea, the pressure had been building for hundreds of years. Tectonic stresses, pressure that dwarfed anything that could be produced by man. The huge stone plate on which India and Australia rested had been inching northwards for millennia, pushing against the equally massive Eurasian landmass near Indonesia. Millions upon millions of tons of rocks, forced against each other as the continents drifted over the surface of the earth. Three days earlier there had been an earthquake in the Macquarie Islands but that had done nothing to alleviate the pressure close to Sumatra.

No single event triggered the rupture. One moment the plates were jammed up against each other as they had been for centuries, the next they simply slipped. It happened at precisely fifty-eight minutes past midnight, Greenwich Mean Time. The southern plate ripped under the northern plate like a bulldozer blade cleaving through wet soil. Rocks ripped like cardboard. Pressure that had accumulated over centuries was released in an instant. The forces at work were almost unimaginable, equivalent to a million times the power of the atom bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. A massive earthquake shook the island of Sumatra

for more than three minutes and registered 9.0 on the Richter scale. By the time the shaking had subsided, hundreds were dead. There had only been three bigger earthquakes in recorded history. But the fatalities caused by the earthquake were only a taste of what was to follow. The rupture in the ocean floor was twelve hundred kilometres long and one hundred kilometres wide. It averaged twenty metres deep and displaced millions of tons of water in a few seconds. On the surface, there was little change in the white-flecked waves. But deep underwater a tidal wave was racing outwards in all directions. North, south, east and west, travelling at the speed of a cruising airliner. Even at that velocity, the nearest landfall was two hours away.

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The floor trembled, a slight vibration that was little more than a tickling sensation underfoot. Alen looked across at Anna. 'Can you feel that?'

Anna nodded. 'Like it's shaking.'

One of the framed pictures on the wall suddenly shifted. It was a beach scene. White sand, palm trees blowing in the wind, a fisherman tending to his nets.

Norbert and Emir came out of the bedroom. 'What is it?' asked Norbert.

The shaking stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. 'An earthquake?' said Anna, frowning.

'They don't have earthquakes in Thailand,' said Alen.

Emir knelt down and placed his hands on the tiled floor, as if preparing to pray. 'It's stopped now,' he said.

'It was nothing,' said Alen.

Norbert pushed the blinds open and peered outside. Tourists in swimming costumes were walking along the beach. The first vendors were starting to appear, touting their wares. Stray dogs were scavenging around the litter bins. 'I'm going outside,' he said.

'It's the final day,' said Alen. 'We should stay indoors. We should pray and meditate on what we have to do to night.'

'I know what we have to do tonight,' said Norbert. 'I need some air.'

Alen looked as if he was going to argue, then he waved dismissively. 'Do as you want,' he said. 'Are the circuits ready?'

'They're fine. I've disconnected the switches but everything else is in place.' He unlocked the door, slipped outside, and closed it behind him.

Alen went over and readjusted the picture, then placed a hand flat against the wall. There was no vibration.

'It could have been a large truck passing by,' said Emir.

Alen shrugged. 'Maybe,' he said. The vibration had felt too intense to have been caused by a truck. But Thailand wasn't in an earthquake zone. Japan, maybe, but Japan was a thousand miles away.

Alen went into the bedroom. The completed circuits lay on the twin beds, one on each. He examined them but didn't touch them. Norbert knew what he was doing. Alen had met Norbert in Bosnia, fighting the Serbs who were killing Muslim families and burying them in mass graves while the world watched and

did nothing. In recognition of their services, both men were given Bosnian citizenship, and passports in whatever name they chose. After the peacekeepers had moved into the former Yugoslavia, Alen and Norbert had stayed on, but while the killing had stopped, the Muslims had continued to be persecuted.

Alen had been approached first, by a representative of a Saudi-funded charity who asked him if he would be prepared to continue his fight against the infidel. There was no pressure, it was a simple interview to see where his loyalties lay. Alen had left the man in no doubt that it was Islam he served. Norbert too was keen to continue the struggle. They were taken into the al-Qaeda fold and taken overland to Waziristan, a mountainous area along the Afghan border with Pakistan, where their training was intensified. That was where they met Anna and Emir. While in Waziristan their training had been taken to a new, higher level. They were groomed to join the ranks of the Shahid. Alen had no doubts about what he was going to do. He had almost died many times in Bosnia, and he would have died happily then fighting the Serbs. He would die just as happily in Thailand, killing the infidels as they drank whisky and partied with prostitutes.

All that was left to do was to transfer the explosive-filled cans into the two Jeeps and to insert the detonators. That would have to wait until dark. Until then all they could do was to wait. To prepare themselves. And to pray.

He showered first, and then changed into clean clothes. He took a mat out of the wardrobe and spread it on the wooden floor, making sure that the top faced the direction of Mecca. Alen prayed five times each day, and washed himself before each prayer.

He faced Mecca, and raised his hands up to his ears. He spoke in Arabic. Prayer could only ever be done in the language of Allah. That was something he had been taught in Pakistan. It was not enough to recite a translation of the Koran. Any translation was a poor imitation of the real thing. Arabic was the mother tongue of the Prophet and the tongue of the wives of the Prophet, and the wives of the Prophet are the mothers of the faithful so therefore Arabic had to be the mother-tongue of every Muslim. Alen proclaimed his intention to worship, then he lowered his hands to his knees and bent forward, head bowed. 'Subhaana rab-biyal azeem' he said, three times. 'Glory to God, the Most Grand.'

Then he straightened up. 'Sami'al laahu liman hamidah, rab-banaa lakal hamd,' he said. 'Our Lord, praise to be to Thee.'

Then he fell to his knees and placed his forehead, nose and palms on the mat. 'Subhaana rab-biyal a'laa,' he said, three times. 'Glory to my Lord, the Most High.'

He had just finished the third recitation when there was a sudden banging on the door to the bungalow. Alen scrambled over to the bed nearest him and pulled a large automatic from under the mattress. He hurried in to the sitting room. Anna had grabbed a handgun from her bag and was moving to the front door. Alen nodded for her to move to the left. Emir started to move to the main bedroom but Alen clicked his fingers and motioned for him to stay where he

was. If it was the police, they'd already have surrounded the bungalow and running wouldn't be an option.

'Who is it?' he called.

'Come and look at this!' It was Norbert.

Emir cursed and Anna exhaled through clenched teeth.

Alen opened the door but kept the security chain on. Norbert was shifting from foot to foot, his head bobbing excitedly.

'We have a procedure,' said Alen. 'The code.'

'Screw the code,' said Norbert. 'You have to see this. Come on.'

Alen glared at Norbert, but unlocked the chain and went outside after him. Emir and Anna moved to follow him but he waved them back. 'Stay there,' he said. 'And lock the door.'

Norbert was walking quickly towards the beach. Alen hurried after him. A sunburnt middle-aged couple were ahead of them, the man fumbling with a video camera. There were other tourists standing on the sand, looking out to sea.

'Norbert, what the hell are you doing?' hissed Alen. 'You know how important today is. We have to stay inside.' His bare feet slipped in the sand as he walked.

Norbert stopped in the middle of the beach and pointed out to sea. Alen frowned as he realised what Norbert was pointing at.

'Have you ever seen anything like that?' asked Norbert. 'It's just gone. The sea has gone.'

Where the water should have been lapping at the beach, there was just wet sand glistening under the early morning sun. Fish, large and small, were flapping around. Three old Thai men were scurrying around picking up the stranded fish and putting them in plastic carrier bags.

'It's a tide,' said Alen. 'That's all.' He pointed. 'The sea is out there, you can see it.'

Norbert shaded his eyes with the flat of his hands and peered at the horizon. There was blue water in the distance. 'The tide doesn't go that far out,' he said.

'How would you know?' said Alen. 'You're from Luxembourg. There's no sea in Luxembourg.'

'I'm just saying, the tide wouldn't go out more than a hundred feet or so at most.'

Alen looked out over the wet sand. It was hard to judge distance without landmarks and the seabed was absolutely flat to the horizon. More Thais hurried onto the beach to gather up the dying fish.

'We should go back inside,' said Alen. 'All these tourists with their video cameras. It's dangerous.' He took his sunglasses from his top pocket and put them on.

Norbert shrugged and turned around. The two men started to walk back to their bungalow.

'You are prepared?' asked Alen.

'Everything is ready,' said Norbert. 'You know that.'

‘I mean in yourself. You, personally?’

‘Of course,’ said Norbert defensively.

Alen look at him over the top of his sunglasses. ‘You are stronger than Emir, you know that. If he has doubts closer to the time...’

‘I can handle Emir.’

Alen patted him on the back. ‘Of course you can. I’m just saying, you must watch him. As I have to watch Anna.’

‘We’re all willing to do what we have to do,’ said Norbert.

Alen nodded. He trusted Norbert. He had been trained by the best. By the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. By al-Qaeda in Pakistan. He was a late convert to Islam but he was physically and mentally prepared to die for Allah. As was Alen. Norbert would die first, with Emir. Their bomb would kill dozens and start a panic. Tourists would start running away from the carnage, towards the sea, and that’s when Alen and Anna would die, and with them would die hundreds of the infidels. It would be a glorious way to die, and it would guarantee him a place in heaven with Allah.

A woman shouted, somewhere off behind them. Both men stopped. There were more shouts. Men and women. Shouts in Thai, English, and German. They turned to look out to sea.

A wave was heading towards shore. A big wave, bigger than any wave Alen had ever seen before. The shouts turned to screams. The Thais dropped their carrier bags of fish and ran across the wet sand. Most of the tourists stood where there were, frozen in terror, their video cameras still trained on the approaching wave.

‘Run!’ yelled Alen, but Norbert had already started sprinting across the sand, his arms pumping furiously.

Alen’s bare feet kicked up sand as he ran. He could hear the wave now, a low rumbling roar. The screams behind him intensified, then the roaring drowned out the screams and then the water slammed into him. His legs were swept from underneath him and he fell backwards and his mouth filled with salty water. He flailed around, felt the sand beneath his feet and kicked himself upright. He saw Norbert, caught up in the surf, gasping for breath, then Alen disappeared under the water again. He slammed into the sand and the impact forced what air there was out of his lungs. He tried to claw his way to the surface but the strength had gone from his arms. He took an involuntary breath and his lungs filled with water. His eyes were stinging and there was a burning pain in his chest. He broke through into the air again, coughing and spitting. He span around in the raging torrent and caught a glimpse of Norbert slamming into the trunk of a palm tree like a broken doll before disappearing under the water again.

He fought to hold his breath but then his head banged on a hard surface. It was the road. The Tarmac ripped the skin from his left cheek and he felt his eye pop out of its socket. He screamed and his mouth filled with water again. He burst into the air and saw the clear blue sky through his good eye, then he saw a car that had been turned onto its side by the force of the water. He tried to kick

around the car but he was moving too fast and his head banged into the rear axle. His neck snapped and he died instantly.

The water ripped through the resort. The bungalows had been built cheaply with little in the way of foundations and the contractors had scrimped on the concrete. The buildings caved in as if they were made of plasterboard.

Emir died reaching for the security chain on the door. He'd heard the screams and the roar of the approaching water and wanted to see what was happening. The water demolished the front wall and the door smashed into him, crushing his nose and filling his mouth with blood. He fell backwards and crashed on to the coffee table as the wave roared over him. The fall stunned him and the door pinned him to the floor. His lungs filled with water as he tried in vain to push the door off him.

Anna was in the shower in the main bathroom so she didn't hear the approaching wave. She felt the bungalow shudder as the water hit but before she could even scream the torrent tore through the walls and the ceiling fell in. A thick teak roof timber slammed against Anna's shoulders and she fell to the tiled floor. The glass shower door shattered and a large shard sliced through her neck. Blood swirled around her, diluted by the seawater, and she lost consciousness before the water filled her lungs.

The explosives and detonating circuits were washed away along with everything in the bungalow. Five seconds after the wave first hit, there was nothing left but the concrete outlines of where the buildings had once stood.

* * *

It was only a few hundred yards from car park where he had returned the rented Toyota to the international terminal and the Saudi walked at a brisk pace. He was carrying only a thin leather briefcase. It was all he had taken from Phuket. Everything else he had burnt in a rubber plantation before he left Phuket for the eleven-hour drive north to Bangkok. He had taken the Sim card from the mobile phone he had used, and bent it and twisted it out of shape before throwing it on the fire. He wiped the mobile phone with a handkerchief, then smashed it to pieces between two rocks. He had thoroughly cleaned the rental car and he used a handkerchief to wipe the steering wheel and door handle as he dropped the car off. The Saudi was adept at covering his tracks. He had to be, his very existence depended on no one even suspecting what he was up to. In the world run by the Americans, the merest suspicion of terrorist activity meant a one-way trip to a prison cell in Guantanamo Bay.

The Thai girl at the Qantas check-in desk greeted him with a cold smile and a mechanical 'sawasdee ka.' The Saudi knew that most Thais didn't like Arabs. It was nothing to do with the problems in the Middle East, it was racism, pure and simple. He enjoyed the look of confusion on her face as he handed her his British passport. She looked at the photograph, then carefully scrutinised his face as if unable to believe that an Arab could be British. Then she carefully examined his Australian visa. The Saudi smiled coldly. The Thais guarded

their citizenship jealously and barely a handful of foreigners were granted a Thai passport each year and only then after meeting strict criteria. The British had no such reservations about issuing passports to foreigners. It was no longer a person's race or background that stipulated the citizenship of the British, it was whether or not they had the correct paperwork. And the paperwork was for sale to anyone with enough money or with the right connections. Russian asset-strippers, American conmen, Nigerian drug-dealers, Indian fraudsters, Muslim terrorists, the British had issued passports to them all. And they were making no move to stem the tide. It was politically incorrect to even mention the fact that the proportion of foreigners holding British passports was growing, that the country's cultural identity was becoming so watered down that no one had any idea what it meant to be British anymore. The Saudi smiled to himself. It wasn't just the British who were committing cultural suicide. Most of Europe was following suit. Virtually all of the Saudi's friends held European passports, and made good use of them. The Saudi had been British since he was a teenager, courtesy of his father's millions. His father had invested heavily in high-profile companies and institutions, and made significant donations to the major political parties. There were other payments, too, in cash and in secret, to politicians and bureaucrats who smoothed the way for the family's citizenship application. Now the Saudi was British, and always would be. Once granted, British citizenship was almost impossible to lose. And with it came the freedom to travel around the world.

The girl handed him his passport and boarding pass, and gave him a wai, her fingertips pressed together underneath her chin. 'The flight will be boarding soon, Sir,' she said.

The Saudi headed for the gate. The metal detector beeped as the Saudi walked through the security check. A girl in a dark blue suit motioned for him to stand on a small wooden plinth and he waited patiently as she ran a portable detector over his body. The detector buzzed as it ran over his watch and he showed her the twenty five thousand dollar diamond-encrusted watch on his wrist, enjoying the look of jealousy that flashed across her face. The detector buzzed again as it passed over his wallet and he took it out and handed it to her. There was a thick wad of hundred dollar bills in the wallet, probably more than a year's salary for the girl, and all the credit cards were gold or platinum.

The Saudi stepped off the plinth, collected his briefcase, and headed for the gate.

He walked by several television screens, all of them showing CNN. Groups of travellers were huddled in front of the sets. The Saudi frowned. Stripped across the bottom of the nearest screen was a headline – 'HUNDREDS DEAD IN PHUKET'. He stopped and stared at the screen as his mind whirled. Had the bomb gone off early? Had his people detonated the device by accident? Or had the police stormed the building, guns blazing. He frowned. On screen was a map of South East Asia.

Another headline appeared on the screen. TSUNAMI KILLS THOUSANDS IN INDONESIA.

The frown deepened. A tsunami? His English was fluent but tsunami looked like a Japanese word. Then he remembered. A tidal wave caused by an earthquake.

The map disappeared from the screen and in its place were two earnest newsreaders; a middle-aged man with blow-dried hair and a woman ten years younger showing just enough cleavage to suggest that it wasn't solely her ability with the autocue that had got her the on-camera job. The men explained that a massive earthquake in the Andaman Sea had caused a tidal wave that had hit beaches in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. Thousands had been killed.

The Saudi walked over to a bank of payphones. He slotted in ten baht coins and called the mobile number of his people in Phuket. A female Thai voice spoke for ten seconds, then repeated the information in accented English. The number was unobtainable.

The Saudi went over to another television set and joined the throng of travellers watching the news. Another headline flashed up next to the CNN logo. DEATH TOLL ESTIMATED AT FIFTEEN THOUSAND.

Fifteen thousand people, thought the Saudi. Fifteen thousand? He had hoped to kill a few hundred at most. But nature had beaten him to the punch and killed thousands instead, including, probably, his four operatives. But it was nature that would be taking the credit for the death toll, not al-Qaeda. An act of terrorism that could have ignited a religious war in the south of Thailand had been replaced by a natural disaster that would unite the world in relief efforts. And leading the charitable donations, as always, would be the Americans. It would do them no good in the long run, the Saudi knew. The Americans would always be hated. Hated for their arrogance, for the way they treated the world as if it were theirs by birthright, for the way they rode roughshod over cultures and civilisations that were millenniums older than theirs. But in the short term, the news beamed around the world would show earnest American politicians pledging to do all they could to rebuild the region, American helicopters dropping supplies. American bankers offering financial aid.

The Saudi smiled wryly. There was nothing he could do to change what had happened. The Thais had a saying for it. Jai yen. Cool heart. Go with the flow. Nature had conspired to destroy his plans in Thailand, so be it. He couldn't fight nature.

As he reached the gate, passengers were already lining up to board the Qantas 747. The Saudi had never understood the urge to be first onto the plane. Even the First Class cabin wasn't an environment he was tempted to linger in, but it was always those in economy class who seemed most eager to cram themselves into an uncomfortable seat in an aluminium tube where they would eat processed food on cue, watch poor quality movies on a screen guaranteed to cause eyestrain, and breathe recycled air. The Saudi sat patiently until the last few passengers were boarding before he handed his boarding pass and passport to be checked and headed for the plane.

He smiled when he saw that the seat next to his was empty. Most First Class passengers were seasoned travellers who would keep conversation to a

minimum, but there were always exceptions and the Saudi was in no mood to make small talk. He had a lot of thinking to do.

He was so deep in thought that he was barely aware of the huge plane powering along the runway, climbing into the sky and banking left over Bangkok as it headed south.

‘Champagne, sir?’

The Saudi jerked as if he’d been stung. A blonde stewardess with too much make-up was holding a tray of filled champagne glasses. The Saudi thanked her and took one. He sipped it. It wasn’t a good vintage, but then taste buds lost most of their sensitivity at thirty thousand feet. The Saudi wasn’t averse to alcohol. He had tried most drugs, out of curiosity rather than need. He ate pork. His favourite dish was the famous full English breakfast, complete with bacon, sausages and black pudding, ideally served at his regular table in the Grill Room of the Savoy Hotel. So far as the Saudi was concerned, Islam wasn’t about food choices, or whether or not one enjoyed a glass of champagne or a good malt whisky. Islam was about politics. And power.

The Saudi knew the Koran by heart, and could quote passages at length, word-perfect. But he didn’t believe much of what the Holy Book contained. He didn’t believe that martyrs to the cause were rewarded with unlimited sex with 72 black-eyed virgins. And that places in Heaven were guaranteed for martyrs and their relatives, and that they would have legions of servants to cater for their every need. There was much in the Koran that the Saudi didn’t believe, in the same way that many Catholic priests did not believe in the literal truth of the Bible. The Koran was a tool to be used to control the people, a tool as powerful as a gun or a bomb. The Saudi appreciated the power of the Koran, and he was as adept at using it as he was in the construction of bombs. So he sipped his champagne and felt not one twinge of guilt.

He listened to the couple in front of talking about the tidal wave and the casualties. ‘Those poor people,’ said the woman, motioning for the stewardess to bring her more champagne.

‘They’re saying twenty thousand dead,’ said the husband. ‘Terrible. Thank God we weren’t there.’

‘Phuket’s always too crowded this time of year,’ said the woman. She nodded at the stewardess as her glass was refilled. ‘It’s become too popular, every man and his dog goes there these days. Give me Koh Samui, any day. Or the Maldives. At least there’s still some exclusivity in the Maldives.’

The Saudi closed his eyes and blocked out the inane chatter. Twenty thousand dead, he thought. Twenty thousand dead killed by the forces of nature. Twenty thousand dead and for nothing. At best he had hoped to kill a hundred or so tourists, but it would have sent a message around the world that Muslims were not prepared to tolerate a world order dominated by the Americans and their European lackeys. It had been his decision to go for Phuket and he was sure that it was the right one. He had also considered attacking the Khao San Road, Bangkok’s backpacker centre, during Thai New Year, but he had decided that the rich tourists of Phuket would be a more high-profile target.

He took a deep breath. What was done, was done. It was time to move on. He already had his people in place for his next operation, and it dwarfed what he had planned for Phuket. Now he had to focus all his energy on what was to come. First Sydney. Then London. Both cities were about to discover what it was like to feel the wrath of Allah.