

SIROCCO



D.L. WILSON

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For Miki,
my inspiration.

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Prologue

May 1987, Wonsan, North Korea

SHARIFAH ABBAS focused on the faint glimmer of light within the Ministry of Health. It was well after midnight. The sidewalks were draped in shadows and an eerie stillness pervaded the normally bustling sector of the city. She glanced nervously at her watch, then up and down the empty street. What was taking Hashim so long? Her brother should have been out of the building by now. All he had to do was photograph one file folder containing the North Korean bioweapons research. The informant had clearly identified the room, file cabinet, file drawer, even the Korean characters on the file folder.

A sudden noise broke the silence, and a dim glow slashed across the building. In that instant, every muscle in Sharifah's body froze. She glanced over her shoulder and spotted a man on a bicycle riding toward her. The balloon tires bounced on the cobblestones, sending weak shafts of light in random directions from a flashlight strapped to the handlebars.

Sharifah tugged her knit cap down until only the dark slits of her eyes were visible above her scarf. Hunching her shoulders, she edged closer to the wall. Even stooped, she was conspicuously taller than Korean women. She held her breath as the bicycle neared, its rattling fenders echoing through the empty street. The rider passed by, apparently oblivious of her presence. Sharifah exhaled slowly as the rattling faded into the damp night air. Then a more ominous sound shattered the stillness—a muffled scream.

Sharifah ran to the side door that Hashim had pried open to break into the ministry. She heard scuffling inside, but not near the door. The sound came from the main entrance, bathed in the yellow glow of security lights. The veins in Sharifah's temples pounded as waves of fear surged through her body. The informant had assured them the building was empty and that the staff didn't start arriving until six each morning.

In each sweaty hand, Sharifah clutched a thin ceramic dagger. She sucked in a deep breath, setting her focus, flattened herself against the rough concrete wall, and inched toward the main entrance.

The scuffling stopped. Inside the building strange voices spoke rapidly in Korean. Sharifah peered through the glass panel beside the steel-studded entrance. Two men were dragging Hashim's limp body across the lobby. Her fear turned to anger as she clutched each dagger with a white-knuckled grip.

When the massive door began to swing open, Sharifah edged behind it. As the first man cleared the door, she lunged at him, sinking a dagger into the soft flesh beneath his rib cage. With all her strength, she drove the knife upwards toward his heart. The man dropped Hashim and fell to one knee. Sharifah jerked the blade free.

The second man spun. His foot flew high and wide in a perfect kick that slammed into Sharifah's right wrist. Searing pain shot through her arm, and the dagger in her right hand clattered on the cobblestone sidewalk. Out of sheer reflex, she thrust the dagger in her left hand at the exposed back of her attacker. The tapered blade found the space between two ribs and sank up to her clenched fist into the man's back. The man flung his arms out, clawing the air, trying in vain to fill his lungs. He made one loud gasp and lunged face first onto the stone sidewalk, the handle of the dagger still quivering in his back.

Sharifah rushed to her brother who was struggling to sit up. His eyes were glazed and his head drooped between his lean shoulders. A large bruise on the side of his neck was near the carotid artery. Probably the result of a punch or kick.

“Did you photograph the files?” she asked, pulling him to his feet.

Hashim rubbed the side of his head, patted the small bag lashed to his belt, and nodded weakly. Sharifah glanced at the two bodies. Dark circles blossomed on the men's white shirts. She had learned her lessons well during her two months at the freedom fighters' training camp.

The street and sidewalks were empty. It was 1:05 A.M. They had barely a half hour to get to the docks before the freighter set sail.

While Hashim recovered, Sharifah collected her daggers, emptied the dead men's pockets, and dragged the bodies between the buildings.

Realization didn't set in until she and Hashim were safely aboard the freighter. This was her first kill. And her second. The slight taste of bile was a blunt reminder, but she felt no remorse, no regret—just a cold emptiness coming from deep within.



SHARIFAH ABBAS felt another wave of nausea coming on. The stench of diesel fumes permeated her clothes, her hair, even her skin. She popped another pastille into her mouth. Strong menthol and eucalyptus vapors filled her nostrils, barely masking the horrible smell. She took a deep breath of the stale air in their cramped compartment in the freighter's hold. The nausea subsided—for now.

The few days she had spent in the bowels of the freighter felt like weeks. She looked at her sleeping brother. As soon as they had hit the open sea, he had become violently ill. His normally dark olive skin was now ashen and drenched in sweat.

Hashim Abbas, “The Lion,” the only son of Farid Abbas, a leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, had been designated by his father to lead their people to a free Palestinian state. Sharifah smiled. Her brother would never be a leader. He lacked idealism. He wasn't fearless, but he had a talent for the spoken word. He

was a natural actor, embellishing even a simple sentence with his own special flair.

Hashim had insisted their father allow Sharifah to join him for his training. Of course her role was to do his domestic chores. But she had learned a long time ago how to get what she wanted from Hashim. If her father knew she had trained alongside her brother, he would probably personally have her killed.

Sharifah gently fanned her brother's face to keep him cool. A loud blast from a distant ship's horn drowned out the din of the diesel engines. Hashim's dark eyes bulged in fear.

"Shh, shh. Everything's all right," Sharifah said as she cradled him in her arms. "Maybe our relief ship has arrived."

Hashim pushed Sharifah away and shook his head.

"I'm okay . . . I'm okay." He wiped the beads of sweat from his face, quickly buttoned his shirt collar, and stood on shaky legs.

"I'll find the captain." Hashim fumbled with the latch to the makeshift cabin. "Maybe we can finally get off this dung heap."

"Make sure he knows we don't leave this cabin until he's absolutely certain it's our Iraqi ship. His life is only as safe as ours," Sharifah called out as her brother squeezed through the narrow door.

Sharifah shuddered and clutched the ceramic daggers Kim Kyu-hah, the leader of the training detachment, had presented to her at graduation. The North Koreans had trained many of the best Palestinian freedom fighters and welcomed the hard currency the Palestinian Islamic Jihad paid in return, but everything always had to be on their terms. They were patient and deadly, much like the feared Asian cobras Kim Kyu-hah kept in cages at the training headquarters. He used them to show how fear could be transformed into power and control. He would release one of the cobras inside a circle of trainees and point out the changes in body language as fear engulfed each of them. Then he confronted the cobra which spread its hood, displaying two, black, oval patterns on the top of the hood that evoked an image of piercing, evil eyes. Kyu-hah rhythmically swayed his

left arm and cupped palm in front of the cobra, attracting its attention. He then slowly moved his right hand toward the side of the cobra's hooded head. With one quick move, he grabbed the cobra by the neck. Then he broke into an evil smirk as he held the thrashing snake in front of each terrified trainee. "You have fear," he snarled. "I have power and control."

Sharifah never flinched, even with the hissing cobra inches from her face. That's when she had earned the daggers. And that's when Sharifah knew she was no longer just a Muslim woman. She was destined to be a warrior of Allah.

If Kim Kyu-hah had any inkling she and Hashim were involved in the break-in at the Ministry, nothing would stop him from hunting them down and killing them. Very slowly. Very painfully.

The ship was slowing. Another vessel was out there. It would be flying either the red, white, and black stripes of Iraq, or the red and blue stripes of North Korea.

Chapter 1

The Present – Monday, 2 P.M., Washington, D.C.

BRETT REYNOLDS clicked off his cell phone as the Secret Service agent ushered him into the West Wing. Brett had been taken by complete surprise when the President’s Chief of Staff had called the principal of his law firm and asked—no, demanded—that he come to Washington immediately. It was a matter of national security.

A week ago Brett had agreed to represent his firm as a member of the Homeland Security Rapid Recognition and Response bio-team. The initial organizational meeting wasn’t scheduled for another two weeks. That was before the call from the Chief of Staff.

Brett never dreamed he’d end up as a member of a special task force on bioterrorism reporting directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security. All he had ever thought about in law school was becoming a partner in a major law firm and making enough money to stick it to his father.

His first job after passing the bar was a hell of a find. The Philadelphia law firm Thomas, O’Malley and Black was looking for a lawyer with a degree in the biological sciences. They wanted to establish a department that focused on the pharmaceutical industry. He had been at the right place at the right time. He started working directly for Arthur Thomas, one of the founding principals of the firm. Within ten years they had eighty-seven corporate clients and a staff of six attorneys with

Brett heading up the department as full partner. During the past five years, Brett continued expanding his firm's reputation by brokering a deal to represent the pharmaceutical lobby.

The Secret Service agent turned down a side hall, opened an ornate mahogany door, and nodded to Brett to step inside. A majestic portrait of Franklin Roosevelt in a gilded frame hung on the center of the far wall. Above the mantel, Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Rider" hung in reverence to the room's other namesake and a subtle reminder that a Republican President was in the White House.

Brett immediately recognized the distinguished gentleman at the head of the table who stood and smiled. Carter Halley, the Secretary of Homeland Security, wore an impeccably tailored charcoal gray suit. His hair, a few shades lighter than the suit, was slicked back with not a strand out of place.

Brett felt a nervous twitch in the pit of his stomach as he approached Halley. He was always on edge when he met with government officials. Well, maybe on guard was more like it. He found that the higher politicians rose in the government ranks, their public commitment to many issues became cloudy, to say the least. Everything became couched in vague terminology and muddled in bureaucracy to cover their asses if something didn't pan out.

Secretary Halley reached a hand toward Brett. "Mister Reynolds, sorry to drag you down here on such short notice." Halley pumped Brett's hand. "But we've had a major incident." Halley pointed to the first chair on the far side of the table.

As Brett navigated around the long, highly polished table, he noticed six other places set with perfectly positioned leather notepads and black pens emblazoned with a silver image of the White House.

Brett set his briefcase next to the chair, sat down, and plucked his lucky pen from his coat pocket. He hadn't lost a case since he started using the Mont Blanc his sister bought him when he became partner. He had often been tempted to switch to electronic note taking but could never pull it off. He seemed

more comfortable looking at his scribbled notes than trying to keep up with his thoughts by pecking away at a laptop or jabbing his thumbs at the miniscule keys on a high-tech cell phone.

“Our plans were to phase in the team over the next few months to minimize the impact on the members.” Brett noticed Halley’s eyes boring in on him as he spoke. It was as if he were trying to read Brett’s mind. “Unfortunately, we’ve been hit with a bio-threat that our department is taking very seriously. I’ll explain the details when the team is convened. I wanted a few minutes alone with you for a frank discussion.”

Where the hell was Halley going with “frank discussion”? Brett decided he’d lay out his perspective before Halley continued. If Homeland Security had a different idea, he’d be in a stronger position. “Arthur Thomas, our senior partner, led me to believe my role was straightforward.” Brett tried to match Halley’s gaze. “As representative of the pharmaceutical lobby, you want my personal connection to the top firms. God forbid, if the country is attacked with a bioweapon, you may need them to respond with a massive production effort.”

Halley smiled. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Then the Secretary leaned towards Brett. “But I want you to know I’m not your run-of-the-mill government bureaucrat. I don’t play the typical games to get results. I’ll let you know exactly what I want from the big boys. No bullshit. No negotiations. There could be a huge number of lives at stake, and we won’t have time for BS. We’ll need results. And fast. Not like Katrina or the Gulf Oil Disaster. We’ve chosen the cream of the crop for the Rapid Recognition and Response bio-team.” Halley leaned back and pursed his lips. “If R3 comes up with something. We’ll run with it.”

Brett was surprised and impressed by Halley. He knew the Secretary had a great record in industry as someone who got results. That’s why President Sheridan tapped him for the job. Sheridan told the country he wanted an executive from the business sector who could restructure the department to be ready to respond to any crisis. Someone who could bring it into action

mode with every subcomponent and agency finely tuned and totally prepared for any terrorist threat. But when Halley took on the mantle of Secretary of Homeland Security, Brett had assumed he'd fall into the web of government bureaucracy. Maybe he was wrong.

“And what exactly do you expect from me?” Brett asked.

“I assume you have the inside track. You can speak frankly with the CEOs of the companies and get results. Quick results.”

Brett inched farther back into his chair. “In our industry, speaking frankly and quick results could be mutually exclusive.” Brett paused for a second until he noticed Halley give a slight nod of agreement. “I’m sure you know better than I that, no matter what CEOs give lip service to, their degree of cooperation depends on the effect on their bottom lines.”

Halley smiled. “That’s why you’re on the team. You’re the ‘go to’ guy.” His grin reverted to a piercing stare. “Can I count on you to get the response we’re going to need?” Halley was living up to his rep—cut to the chase.

Brett tightened his grip on the arm of the chair. Now it was his turn to play politician. “There are no guarantees.” He leaned back against the cool leather. “But I can assure you I’ll do my utmost to gain the cooperation of the pharmaceutical companies. When I get a better handle on how this R3 team is going to function, I’ll have some serious discussions with the key executives.” Halley’s thick black brows raised slightly. “Let’s face it,” Brett continued, “in case of a national catastrophe, the companies that step up to the plate and save lives will benefit for years from the PR. That alone should get their full cooperation.”

Halley stood and shook Brett’s hand. “Great to have you on board.” Halley pulled a cell phone from beneath his jacket, punched a button and said, “Bring them in.”

Brett stood with Halley as the door to the Roosevelt Room opened. Now he’d find out what the “major incident” was that brought top bioresearchers from around the country to the White House on less than twenty-four hours’ notice.

Chapter 2

Monday, 3 P.M., New York City

MISHA BENOIT laid her head back, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, enjoying the lavender scent of rich bath oils. Her body felt almost weightless in the warm swirling water. Her psychiatrist claimed she was finally bringing her life into proper focus, and she thought it wouldn't be long before he'd give his approval. She could sense it. In a way she hated being subservient to yet another man, but Dr. Arthur Levenson was different. He had given her the strength to become what she felt inside.

Loud ringing broke Misha's reverie. She lifted a hand from the purple-tinted water, blotted her long fingers on a towel, and groped for the portable phone that was always nearby. Her livelihood depended on being available whenever a client felt the urge. But everyone knew her standing rule—Mondays were off limits.

Depressing the ON button, Misha brought the phone to her ear. "Hello," she said in her most seductive voice.

"Misha, darling, are you available tonight for a very special date?"

Misha hesitated. The voice had a strange metallic quality to it, as if she were listening to an answering machine. "I'm sorry, to whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Misha. Misha. It's of no importance. This is a business call. A very lucrative business call."

“Then you should know my business hours.”

The caller spoke slowly in a near whisper. “I really think you should make an exception this one time.”

“There are no exceptions,” Misha replied, matching the caller's emphasis.

“Go to your door. You'll find credentials that will make me your most intimate and special customer.”

Misha felt a sudden chill, even in the warm bath. No client knew where she lived. Her apartment was her refuge, her safe haven from all the sickos she met in her business.

The caller sensed her concern. “No need to worry. No one's there. Only an envelope very discreetly slipped under the door.”

Misha got out of the bath. She grabbed her terry robe, wrapped it around her, and stuffed the phone in a pocket as she hurried to the door. There on the carpet, still partway under the door, lay a lavender envelope. She picked it up and began to open it.

She stopped suddenly and brought the envelope to her nose. She thought the scent might be the bath oils on her skin. No, it was the slightly spicy but heady aroma of *Mystère de Rochas 85°*. A twinge of fear surged through her. Very few people knew of her favorite perfume—one of the extravagances she allowed herself.

Misha ripped open the envelope. Inside were two stacks of crisp hundred dollar bills and a slip of paper with a typed address in Gramercy Park. She flicked through the bills. There were twenty-five. It took a lot of two and three hundred-dollar tricks to make this kind of money.

Misha picked up the portable phone and brought it to her lips. Before she could say anything, the caller spoke, “I take it we're now on more intimate terms.”

Misha's response was slow and deliberate. “That depends on what you have in mind.”

“Just show up at my place tonight at eight. The address is in the envelope. The other half of your fee will be waiting for you. And don't worry, I'm not into pain. All I want is what you've

done hundreds of times before. And I'm told you enjoy it, immensely.”

Misha hesitated. When things are too good to be true—they usually aren't. But she had twenty-five hundred dollars in her hand and the promise of another twenty-five hundred.

“Since I have your address,” she said in a coy voice, “you might as well tell me who you are.”

“My anonymity is worth five thousand dollars. The address could be borrowed, rented, bought. Just be here at eight. And wear your sexiest red. Ciao.”

Misha stared at the phone. Her skin tingled. There was something strange about the caller's voice. It was hollow. Disconnected. Sexy.

Chapter 3

Monday, 3 P.M., Washington, D.C.

THE FIRST PERSON through the door was Harold Prescott, the head of the Institute for NanoBioTechnology at Johns Hopkins. Brett wasn't surprised. Prescott was one of the old power brokers in biotechnology. Always pushing the envelope. Highly respected by his peers. Prescott's jowly, pudgy face merged into a starched white collar with a bulbous knit tie.

He was followed by Nolan Moran who had an uncanny resemblance to the popcorn king, even down to the wavy silver hair, black-rimmed, thick plastic frames, and bow tie. Moran headed a molecular biology and immunology lab at Emory University.

Ashley Norcross from the University of California followed Moran. At first glance, with no makeup and short, curly gray hair, she looked like a stay-at-home grandmother, but she was one tough researcher. She headed up a lab at the renowned California Institute for Quantitative Biosciences.

The next two men entering the room were not familiar to Brett. Secretary Halley introduced the first man as Colonel Karl Jensen, the head of the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick who represented the Laboratory Response Network consisting of over 150 integrated national and international laboratories fully equipped to respond quickly to acts of chemical or biological terrorism. The LRN had been established by the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention by a Presidential Directive. Jensen's rigid stance, firm jaw, and piercing stare would peg him anywhere as career military. Brett was aware that USAMRIID and the LRN had been major players in supporting the FBI and other federal agencies in setting standards for identifying biological agents.

The second man was Aldo Delvecchio from the New England Regional Center of Excellence for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases (NERCE/BEID). Delvecchio wore a suit definitely not off-the-rack, and his jet black hair with wisps of gray at each temple had just enough gel to keep every lock in place. He looked more like an Italian movie star than the head of a research center focused on innovative solutions to the challenges posed by biological threats.

Brett froze when he saw the last member of the R3 team. He was totally shocked when Deborah Lansford walked through the door. And apparently so was Deborah. She stopped short. Her head jerked when her eyes locked with Brett's. Typical of Deborah, she quickly regained her composure and continued to her seat at the far end of the conference table.

Halley nodded toward her. "The last member of the R3 team, Dr. Deborah Lansford, heads up a world-renowned research lab at the Wistar Institute."

Brett was dumbstruck at the sight of Deborah. It had been more than fifteen years since he last saw her face. And the second shock hit him even harder—she was working in Philadelphia.

"Please, please, everyone be seated." Secretary Halley waited till the R3 team settled into their plush chairs before he continued. "Again, I want to apologize for calling you here on such short notice." Halley motioned toward Ashley Norcross seated at the end of Brett's side of the table. "I especially want to thank Dr. Norcross for coming all the way from the West Coast to be here for this meeting."

Brett noticed Deborah glancing uncomfortably towards him as Halley sat down at the head of the table and opened a leather binder. Then the Secretary looked up and made eye contact with

each member of the team. “As you know, I’m the new guy on the block. I’ve only been the Secretary of Homeland Security for a few months, but in that time I’ve come to believe our most vulnerable area of attack is from bioweapons.”

Brett nodded in agreement. He wasn’t on the front lines of the research, but he knew enough to realize bioterrorism could be the worst of all nightmares.

The Secretary paused and leaned forward. “It’s not if, but when.” Then he raised his massive brows and slowly nodded. “And we’ve just received our first major threat. A letter arrived at the President’s office from a group calling itself Sirocco, claiming to have killed Senator Price and Chief Justice Gallagher during the testing phase of a bioweapon.”

Heads jerked as the R3 team gave each other questioning glances. Deborah was the first to speak. “I’m sorry, Mr. Secretary, but are you telling us that two top level government officials who reportedly died of natural causes almost a year ago were killed by a bioweapon? And no one was aware of it?”

“That’s why you’re all here. We need your expertise. I don’t want to take any chances.” Halley pulled two file folders from his binder and held them up. “Our medical experts found no evidence of obvious common biological pathogens in the deaths of Senator Price or Chief Justice Gallagher. But they also agreed that does not rule out all biological or chemical agents.”

Harold Prescott shook his head, leaned back in his chair and squinted at Halley. “I’m sure these men had the best possible medical care. They died six and nine months ago. Could be this. Could be that. Determining the cause becomes more difficult later in the game. If it was viral, we’re in the dark. The cause may have died with the patients.”

Ashley Norcross turned towards Prescott. “Harold, don’t jump to conclusions. These men were up in age, had numerous health problems. Immediate cause of death, probably heart failure. Back in the underlying causes, there may be some commonalities.”

“That’s why we brought you here,” Halley said with a satisfied grin. “You’re the best researchers this country has. And we want to give you an environment where you can brainstorm. Do some creative problem solving as a team. Get the job done faster and better. With bioterrorism we’re talking about thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives, maybe even more. And to protect our nation, sooner is better than later. That’s what R3 is all about, Rapid Recognition and Response. And I emphasize the word, Rapid. Tonight you’ll be staying at the Willard InterContinental right next to the White House. Tomorrow you’ll be taken to Homeland Security Headquarters not far from here to meet with our Directorate of Science and Technology and the Office of Health Affairs. They’ll try to bring you up to speed on our latest projects and systems of communications.”

Halley pushed a button on his cell. “Now you’ll have a chance to practice your brainstorming.”

The door to the Roosevelt Room opened and a distinguished-looking younger version of Halley walked in followed by a man and a woman carrying folders, which they laid out in front of each member of the R3 team. Then the woman went to the far end of the room, opened a media center, and a large projection screen emerged from the ceiling and covered the center of the wall. The man opened a laptop computer and placed it in front of the seat next to Halley, and he and the woman left.

“All of you except Attorney Reynolds have met Calvin Taylor, Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security,” Halley said as he motioned to the new man who stood next to him. Deputy Secretary Taylor will be taking you through Homeland Security tomorrow while I head up to the Federal Building in New York which will be the central headquarters for R3.”

Halley glanced over at Taylor. “The Deputy Secretary is also highly skilled at running brainstorming sessions. He handles all of our top-level strategy meetings.” Halley looked back at the team and smiled. “And it gives me an opportunity to sit back and absorb all that’s going on from a less myopic point of view.”

Brett noticed a few of the R3 members smirking. Taylor adjusted his black wire-rimmed glasses, which gave him a professorial air, and quickly typed on the laptop. **R3 PRELIMINARY MEETING** shot across the top of the large projection screen. “This is going to be a get-acquainted session,” he said. “A chance for us to start setting some guidelines and procedures for how R3 can best function. When it comes to bioterrorism, you’re Homeland Security’s brain trust. One of the problems of bringing a group of geniuses together is getting you to open up in front of your cohorts, who also happen to be your top competitors.”

Now it was Brett’s turn to stifle a laugh. This had been his greatest concern about the R3 concept. These people were the *crème de la crème* of the country’s biomedical researchers. They spent a large percentage of their time vying for research grants in head-to-head competition. Getting them to function as a team could be tough. Halley and Taylor had their work cut out for them. With genius comes a healthy portion of ego.

“R3 is a team,” Taylor continued. “You all have equal rank. You’re not being graded for your contributions. What’s most important for R3 is that you participate, speak your mind. Nothing is too trivial or off base. The bottom line is simple. We have to be prepared to respond as fast and as effectively as possible to any bio-threat.”

Two graphic images shot up on the screen: a series of random shapes and the same shapes formed into a DNA double helix. “In brainstorming the whole is gestalt, much greater than the sum of the parts,” Taylor continued. “We’ll provide you with the best resources available. You’ll have direct access to the CDC and USAMRIID. That’s why Colonel Jensen is on board. All we need is for you to let your creative juices flow with no restrictions. Bounce ideas off each other. To get started, let’s discuss what resources you think you’ll need to do a thorough investigation of the deaths of Senator Price and Chief Justice Gallagher.” Taylor paused, then added, “And to be prepared to respond to any future attacks on government officials, we’re

creating extensive research space for you at Plum Island. You'll be going there on Wednesday to design the labs. Our goal is to have them fully functional by next week."

"Excuse me," Deborah broke in. "You told us to speak our minds. We were initially told we would be setting up R3 facilities over a period of a few months. Now it seems like we're in overdrive . . . no . . . superdrive. And because some group *claims* to have killed the Senator and Chief Justice six and nine months ago. I agree it's important to look into the claims. But to rush setting up research facilities and procedures to provide effective Rapid Recognition and Response to bio-threats seems like a knee-jerk reaction."

Brett noticed Taylor shoot a serious look toward Halley who pursed his lips and slowly nodded. Then Halley stood. "You've all been vetted to top-level security clearance. What I am about to tell you is highly secret and must not leave this room. It's the reason I've put this program on 'superdrive.' The group, Sirocco, claims they have fully perfected their bioweapon and will demonstrate it by killing another key government official . . . by the end of this week."

Chapter 4

Monday, 7:30 P.M., New York City

LONG SHADOWS crept over Misha's 4th floor walkup at St. Marks Place in the East Village. She stared at the expressionless face in the lighted make-up mirror. She drew her slender fingers along the ridge of her cheek, pulling the skin taut to check the illusion she would create for her "special date."

The rest of the apartment was bathed in darkness. The frame of lights held her focus. Her flesh tingled as she began the slow process of becoming Misha, a memory, a vision that many men remembered long after the passion had faded. She knew how to play men like the delicate strings of a surreal instrument. Plucking and stroking, building them to a crescendo—softly, slowly, gently backing away—then building again and again until they pleaded . . . pleaded . . . pleaded.

Tiny laugh lines radiated from the corners of her mouth. Misha spread moisturizer over her face and neck. She felt her skin take on a new suppleness. Then she applied a color neutralizer and a beige foundation to set up the blank canvas for tonight's vision. She brushed rich mauve pressed powder from underneath the line of her cheekbone up into her hairline to create a lean sensual look.

The eyes are the windows to the soul, she thought as she lined the inside edges with a black charcoal pencil, then a deeper second edge in slate. Black mascara lengthened her lashes and a white shimmer powder under her brows added a subtle glow.

Misha selected a deep red liner and outlined her lips, then painted them with a rich red cream using a sable brush. The face that gazed back at her exuded a wildness, a wantonness that few women could create. Her lips parted and the tip of her tongue explored the swollen contours of glistening red. Her mysterious john would get his five thousand dollars worth, and then some.

Misha had no trouble hailing a cab. During the ride to Gramercy Park, she felt a building apprehension. Her roommate, Helena, had always warned her about strange johns. “Don't get lured into any weird off-beat soirees, dear girl. That's inviting a trip to Bellevue, or the morgue.” Helena was out of town, and this guy had promised everything would be straight.

The cab stopped in front of a respectable-looking brownstone. Iron grillwork protected the oak-framed glass door and arched transom. Misha paid the cabby and went up the steps. Smooth indentations were worn into the gray stone. The steps were very steep, and she felt a bit unsteady in her red spiked heels.

Two well-kept planters framed the small outer landing. Lights blazed in the entrance foyer. A flickering glow escaped from around the border of the drawn drapes in the front room to her left.

Misha glanced at the adjacent white stone building on the right. A black and white sign next to the door announced WILLIAM SHANE, ATTORNEY AT LAW. A buzzer startled her. It was the brownstone's entrance door. Someone was buzzing her in.

She entered the foyer and found a lavender note taped to the first apartment door. She opened the folded paper. Again the scent of her perfume filled her nostrils. “Misha. Please enter the apartment. The envelope on the console contains the balance of your fee.” Everything this john did was very formal, very carefully thought out. Too thought out. Misha had an urge to leave, but then she thought of the money.

Misha stepped back to the front door and glanced up and down the block. A few cars hurried by. No one else was on the

sidewalk at that time of night. She scanned the names next to the buzzers by the door. The slot for Apt. 1 was blank, and she didn't recognize any of the others. She sensed someone watching her. Self-consciously she checked her blond wig. The closer she got to her anonymous john, the more anxious she became.

Misha tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. Slowly she opened the door to the apartment. Directly before her was a console with a delicate dried floral arrangement and another lavender envelope. She opened the envelope. It contained twenty-five one hundred dollar bills and another note. She raised the bills to her nose. This time there was no perfume. She shoved the money into her shoulder bag and read the note.

It instructed her to go into the living room to her right and strip to her bra, stockings, and heels. Then she was to put on a blindfold and straddle the glass table.

Misha's concern heightened, but so did her excitement. Her breathing became shallower and faster.

She eased open the living room door. The room was illuminated by candles, all in the shape of large penises. She focused on one of the candles as hot wax built up on the tip. It spilled over and dripped slowly down the length to form a small puddle around the testes. Her eyes glazed and the scene blurred slightly.

The furniture had been moved away from the center of the room. There in the flickering candlelight was a low glass table in the shape of a scarab. The body of the sacred Coleoptera was etched in sculpted transparent glass. Six stainless steel legs held it frozen in space like a holy shrine. The thick aroma of incense permeated the air. Misha began to shed her clothes. She hesitated once, but continued. Her mind raced. The room engulfed her in its eerie silence. She could even hear the faint hiss of the candle flames. There could be no stopping now—she had reached the point of no return.

She straddled the indentation in the hourglass shaped scarab. Her body shuddered when she lowered herself onto the glass, the cold surface merging with the heat of her flesh. She picked up

the blindfold and fitted the molded rubber pads against her eye sockets and entered a world of darkness. Tiny pinpoints of light exploded at random, and ghost images of the flaming penises faded against the background of black.

Misha's body tensed as she waited for a sound, a sign. After a few minutes she relaxed. A subtle current of air caressed her left cheek, as if someone had moved by her very closely. She turned her head in that direction and listened carefully. But there was nothing, only the distant sounds of the street. Then she heard a faint rustling. A crackling sound that moved towards her. There was a metallic click and the rustling stopped. The room was quiet again. Misha could hear the forced labor of her breathing. The musty smell of incense mingled with the acrid odor of burning paraffin.

She trembled when something stroked her right cheek. The touch was soft and gentle. Too soft. There was an unnatural quality to the touch; too smooth, and the vague scent of latex. A condom? Misha smiled.

The stroking continued down to her chin and urged her head upward. Then it lightly traced her lips. But something cold replaced the warmth at her chin. There was a deafening roar. . . .

Chapter 5

Tuesday, 7:30 A.M., Washington, D.C.

BRETT WAITED for Deborah by the main desk in the lobby of the Willard. Yesterday had been consumed by meetings, dinner, and more meetings. He and Deborah hadn't had a free moment. A few times he even sensed she was steering clear of him. The R3 team met until late discussing possible scenarios relating to the bio-threat and how Homeland Security could best respond. Everyone agreed that getting labs set up under a high threat level was far from ideal.

Brett had caught Deborah's glances on a number of occasions while the team was digging through Price's and Gallagher's medical records. She left the last meeting early to access her lab's research files over the Internet. As Brett watched her leave, he realized she hadn't changed in fifteen years. She was still the red-headed grad student with a scrubbed-clean English complexion that many women would kill for. She was lean, but not skinny, tall, but her height was deceptive because she always wore flats. She was exactly as he remembered her when she dumped him fifteen years ago.

This morning when he awoke, his message light was blinking. It was Deborah. "Brett, I was as shocked as you were. We need to talk. Please meet me at the main desk in the lobby at seven-thirty."

Brett wasn't sure what to expect. Years ago he had finally managed to erase the memories. But last night he woke up twice.

Visions of him and Deborah came rushing back like it had been yesterday. But so did the pain. He had hated her for a long time, passionately. It tore him apart thinking about her. The hate, and the love. He didn't know which was worse.

"May I help you sir?" A bellman smiled at Brett.

"Thank you, but I'm waiting for a guest." Brett returned the smile.

The Willard was certainly a unique spot to meet Deborah after all these years. It was beyond exquisite. No expense had been spared to provide the finest European elegance. Magnificent marble columns with ornate capitals lined the two-story main lobby, drawing Brett's eyes to the carved ceiling panels. From the center of each panel, glass globes hanging from three gold chains brought a radiant glow to the lobby's marble, alabaster arches, and gold and jade friezes.

"Not bad quarters for a bunch of research geeks and a Legal Eagle." Deborah's attempt at a smile was obviously strained.

Brett wasn't ready to return even a forced smile. "You've been in Philly." He shook his head. "You didn't call?"

"Brett, please, let's try to get off on the right foot. It's been a long time . . . I had no idea you were in Philadelphia. I thought you'd be in New York running your father's company."

Brett opened his mouth to respond, but thought better of it. Then he glanced at his watch. "Let's get a table before the rest of the team gets here," he said as he turned and headed toward the restaurant.

The silver-haired maitre d' greeted them before they were two steps into the two-story, oak-paneled dining room. "Welcome to the Willard Room. Table for two?"

"May we have that table?" Deborah pointed to a small round table near a far corner of the room away from the few occupied tables. The maitre d' nodded with a practiced smile and handed menus to a thin, young man with a tan that had gotten a lot of help.

The waiter seated them, took their coffee orders, and left to get Deborah's double Italian dark roast espresso and Brett's decaf cappuccino.

"Well, to say the least, I was surprised when you entered the Roosevelt Room," Brett said. "How did a Brit get on the team?"

"I'm not." Deborah raised an eyebrow. "You knew my mom was from California. When my dad died eight years ago, she wanted to return to the states. I was lucky to get a lab at Berkeley. A couple years ago I jumped coasts to Wistar."

Brett leaned back as the waiter arrived with their coffees.

"Are you ready to order?" he asked.

Brett noticed Deborah's face glow in the diffused light as she turned toward the waiter. "Sorry, we'd like to wait for our associates. They should be here shortly."

Deborah's gaze rose toward the high ceiling then lowered to focus on Brett. "It looks like you've made your mark on the legal profession."

"And you certainly haven't lost your passion for bio-science."

Deborah smiled. This time it wasn't strained. "Is that a backhanded dig at me for taking the fellowship at Oxford and staying in London?"

"No, it's actually a compliment. You obviously made a name for yourself."

"You often told me I was anything but ordinary."

Brett grinned. "Oh, you're anything but ordinary."

"You two trying to hide from us?"

Brett turned his head as a smiling Ashley Norcross headed their way beside the waiter, followed by Delvecchio and Jensen. Prescott and Moran were standing next to the maitre d' pointing in their direction. Brett stood and greeted Norcross who was all smiles.

"I've got some interesting news to start our day." Norcross motioned to Carl Jensen who was stroking his bald head. "I mentioned to Carl that because of the lack of any credible evidence in the medical files, our only hope is to get the

government to rush exhumations and autopsies.” She flipped both hands toward Jensen in an exaggerated introduction.

Jensen turned to the waiter and pointed toward Prescott and Moran. “Those two gentlemen are in our party. Please ask them to join us.”

When the waiter was out of earshot, Jensen turned back to Brett and Deborah. The Army colonel never blinked or altered his dour expression. “Senator Price and Chief Justice Gallagher had one thing in common that didn’t show in their medical records or death certificates . . . they were cremated.”

Chapter 6

September 1987, Baghdad, Iraq

“**ALLAHU AKBAR**, *Allahu Akbar, La illa ha il'allah*. God is great, God is great, there is but one God, Allah.”

Hashim Abbas finished the chant and lifted his forehead from the prayer rug, then raised his hand to shield his eyes from the ball of fire rising over the Tigris. He was on the balcony of a magnificent home in the Al Jadriya district of Baghdad, a guarded peninsula jutting out into the river. His cousin, Muhammad Abu al-Abbas, leader of the Palestine Liberation Front, had proudly presented the house to Hashim as reward for procuring North Korea's research on biological warfare.

The PLF was treated with great respect by their mentor, Saddam Hussein. Saddam had given Abu al-Abbas safe haven after he had masterminded the 1985 Achille Lauro hijacking.

Sharifah watched her brother from the living room with a sense of grave concern. She feared he wouldn't follow through on the PLF's long range plans. He lacked the dedication to their cause. More important to him than the future of the Palestinians were his own personal pleasures. As a child, her mother had warned Sharifah of this frailty. He suffered no physical weakness, but Sharifah feared he lacked mental resolve. Hashim didn't share the same passions as other Arab men. From that day forward, Sharifah knew in her heart that she must be Hashim's rock, his guide through the difficult times. She must be the soul of Abbas, the lion.

Her mother's warning had been borne out many times. When Hashim studied at the private Iraqi cadet school near Woking in the hills of Surrey, England, Sharifah carried him through. She was not allowed to study at the school, but every day she reviewed tapes of Hashim's classes, read his books, and tutored him. He lacked a passion for learning. He'd rather sneak off to London for long weekends with his friends. As a young child, he had listened to his older sister, but the older he got the more independent he became.

The feared Mukhabarat, Saddam's security control group, had enrolled Hashim in the two-story red brick school to prepare him to pass the "A" levels to qualify for university. With Sharifah's guidance Hashim passed his "A" levels with flying colors—as did Sharifah, without even attending the school.

Sharifah begged to attend Oxford with Hashim. Her father, fearing she would succumb to the evil ways of the West, threatened to bring her home if she even entertained the thought again. Her only purpose was to serve her brother and preserve the Abbas name as a power within the Palestinian cause.

Sharifah knew that an education could give her an edge in breaking the bounds imposed upon Arab women. Her mother secretly sent her money to attend the university and Sharifah developed a ravenous appetite for learning and excelled in her undergraduate years. While Hashim scored in the fifty-seventh percentile in the public and honors exams, Sharifah graduated second in her class.

They stayed on at Oxford, entering Linacre House where they earned advanced degrees. Hashim specialized in chemistry so he could help his father in the family textile business and also have the skills needed to be a PLF explosives expert. Sharifah focused on biology and tutoring Hashim.

Some Arab countries had opportunities for women in education and the professions, but most Arab men still refused to accept women in those roles. Women were domestics and child bearers, nothing more. Now, almost two years after graduating

with honors from Oxford, Sharifah suffered the frustration of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

Hashim folded his prayer rug and turned toward Sharifah. The sun cast a hazy glow around his tall, thin frame. His eyebrows were prominent slashes accentuating deep-set dark eyes.

“Hashim, we must leave.” Sharifah held out the leather briefcase she had bought at Harrods.

“My dear sister, you torment yourself too much. You're going to die of worry one of these days. Sit with me. We'll have our coffee, then we can enjoy the ride to Suwera.”

“This is not a London tea party, Hashim. These tests could chart the future of our cause.” Sharifah's voice was tinged with anger. “Drink your coffee. I'll be downstairs waiting in the car.”

Chapter 7

The Present – Tuesday, 6 P.M., Washington, D.C.

UNION STATION was bustling with throngs of travelers when Brett and Deborah arrived to catch the Acela back to Philadelphia. The station was jammed with business people heading home from their workday at the nation’s capital, college kids loaded down with backpacks and duffle bags, and families buying last-minute souvenirs after a day of sightseeing.

Deborah had insisted on canceling her flight and taking the high-speed train with Brett. The past two days at the White House and Homeland Security had taken its toll on both of them. Playing what-if scenarios and coming to terms with bioterrorism in the US being a “not if, but when” reality was not what Brett had expected.

Deborah pointed to the waiting area topped by large Art Nouveau banners of Acela trains with backdrops of D.C. and New York. She headed right up to the entrance to the gate. “I’d like us to be the first to board so we can get settled before the crowds.”

Brett knew something was really bugging her. He wasn’t sure if it was running into him or something about the R3 team.

After they settled into their seats, Deborah turned sideways until she was almost facing Brett. “Married? Kids?”

Brett slowly shook his head. “No. You?”

“I haven’t had a vacation in the last ten years. Marriage and kids aren’t even in my vocabulary.”

“Well, that’s one thing we’ve got in common. I’ve done my share of traveling, but its been business all the way. The pharmaceutical lobby’s really racked up my air miles.”

Deborah nodded. “I’ve been tethered to my lab. Except for a few conferences each year, it’s been my life.”

Brett shrugged. “It’s the life you chose.”

Deborah’s eyes told it all. The blinks. The random focus everywhere but directly at him. Brett suspected she was hiding something or he’d ticked her off. He’d seen it many times before.

“I thought about you a lot,” Brett said before she could reply. “Wondered how you were. Wondered what happened to you.”

Deborah glanced out the train window. “You know what I wanted. It was something you were not ready to commit to.”

“I couldn’t get married then,” Brett replied.

“Then, or ever?”

Brett shrugged. “I must admit, it wasn’t then, and isn’t now, at the top of my list. And it must have slipped down on your list over the years.”

Deborah stared directly at him. “It’s gonna be difficult, isn’t it? Working together on R3.”

Brett returned her look. “Not really. You’re a top researcher. I’m a great attorney. We’ve got a job to do. A lot of lives could be at stake. That’s why Homeland Security got us onboard.”

“And now Homeland Security’s put us in crisis mode.”

“You got that right,” Brett replied. “But in my opinion, the government doesn’t seem to have a hell of a lot for us to go on other than speculation and innuendo. And I can still read you well enough to know something’s bothering you about this whole R3 scenario.”

“Not something. A lot of somethings.”

“Well, what’s your honest assessment?” Brett asked.

“Bottom line, I think the government’s wasting the time of valuable researchers to cover their own asses if something does happen. They’ll use us as scapegoats if there is a pandemic. Any responsible medical professional should have identified any

suspicious symptoms in Price and Gallagher. Since they didn't, there probably was no bioweapon, or it was something damn sophisticated. There's no way in hell we're going to find out what happened to them from their ashes!"

"But we can't lose sight of the main objective of R3," Brett replied. "Neither Halley nor Taylor is a highly trained expert in bioweapons. Taylor summed it up well. Homeland Security is looking to R3 as their brain trust. Our task is to guide them in making the right decisions, and making them quickly. You and Moran made it very clear. In most cases you're not going to be able to come up with a magic bullet to cure or inoculate people against an unknown bioweapon before many lives are lost."

Deborah tilted her head back against the seat and sighed. "I guess that's what's been bugging me, lives . . . so many lives. I'm not sure how I'll respond under those conditions. That's exactly why I didn't become a practicing physician." Then she glanced out the window at the landscape flashing by.

"It's not that different than what you're doing in your lab. You're trying to develop vaccines and medications to reduce the number of lives lost every day. People are dying and you're fighting to keep them alive."

"But in the lab at least I'm somewhat in control. Being on R3 some wacko terrorist is in control."

"That's why you're here," Brett replied. "Wistar has a world-class reputation for being on the leading edge of technology and, hell, you're heading up a major department. You certainly impressed the decision makers."

Brett saw a slight glimmer return to Deborah's eyes. A few delicate red strands drooped across her forehead, and she smoothed them back into place.

"What got me so bummed out were the last few sessions we had while you were meeting with the communications group. We were brainstorming possible bioweapons." Deborah raised her eyebrows, craned her neck, and glanced at the empty seats behind them. They were in the first row of the car, so there was

only a restroom wall and an ad for an investment bank in front of them. “You can add paranoia to my growing list of foibles.”

Brett was seeing a whole new side of Deborah, a human side he had missed while they were together in grad school. She had been totally engrossed with classes and research projects except for those rare times they went to the symphony or spent an evening at a jazz club and ended up at his apartment. Deborah would wake up in the middle of the night and start caressing him. He always wondered what kind of dreams had triggered her sexual fantasies. During those late night love fests, Deborah was in charge, in control.

“Anything interesting?” Brett asked.

“You would not believe the list we came up with, and it’s only the tip of the iceberg.” Deborah let out a deep breath. “The kind of iceberg that took down the Titanic.” Then she turned and settled into the corner of her seat facing Brett. “Sarin’s been used already. One hell of a toxic gas. Attacks the central nervous system causing convulsions and death.” She looked down the train car at the many filled seats. “Some wacko pops open canisters in a train or subway station. Or what’s to stop them from developing a drug-resistant strain of severe invasive strep A. That’s the infamous flesh-eating bacteria that killed Muppeteer Jim Henson. What makes this variant of strep so dangerous is that the bacterium itself is infected with a virus that spurs the germ to produce powerful toxins. Then there are many viruses like Ebola, Marburg, and X from Sudan that kill rapidly.” She cocked her head and nodded. “But Ashley was quick to point out that these guys have a good side. They kill so quickly they have little chance to infect others.”

Then Deborah raised a finger in caution. “Prescott kept harping on the food-based bioweapons. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, mad cow disease. Or prions. They’re a thousand times smaller than the smallest virus. Invisible to all available technology, contain no DNA, and can’t be destroyed by heat or ultrasound.” Deborah rubbed her temples with her finger tips, then gave Brett a look etched in pure frustration. “In the realm of

microbiology, the list is endless. Our most vulnerable form of attack is from bio-weapons.” She turned her head and stared out the window. “It’s not if, but when.”

A reggae beat erupted from Deborah’s bag. She dug out her cell phone, snapped it open, glanced at the screen, and held it up to her ear. When she finished the call, she shrugged. “What can I say? My team missed me.”

“Damn.” Brett pulled his brief case from the overhead rack and dug his hand around the bottom of the bag until he pulled out his cell phone. “I turned my cell off when I entered the White House.” He flipped it open and scrolled through the list of messages. He recognized one number that showed up three times. It was his brother in New York. He hadn’t spoken to Derrick in a few weeks.

Brett dialed his brother’s number without listening to the long list of messages. If Derrick called him three times, it was important. After two rings, a male answered with a “Hello, who’s calling?” but it definitely wasn’t Derrick.

“This is Derrick Reynolds’s brother. Who’s this?”

“I’m a police officer. Let me put your sister on the phone.”

Chapter 8

September 1987, Baghdad, Iraq

SHARIFAH AND HASHIM drove south along the Tigris from Baghdad to Suwera. The sky was cerulean broken only by the explosion of sunlight that blotted out much of the distant landscape. Sharifah watched a river steamship struggle upstream against the deceptive current. The murky waters of the Tigris hid many dangers. She likened it to the Mukhabarat, whose shadowy tentacles extended into the Estikhbarat, military intelligence, and the dreaded Amn, the secret police. But Sharifah knew that all of these tentacles eventually led to the Prince of Baghdad and the champion of the oppressed Arab people, Saddam Hussein.

Sharifah opened Hashim's briefcase and removed a folder. She carefully analyzed the formulas used to synthesize the deadly compounds. The scientists had translated the North Korean research files and prepared the chemical and biological agents for a field test. Saddam's air force had dropped bombs the day before on two Kurdish villages. The lab at Suwera would have the results.

Achmed Jussuf was waiting for them when they arrived. He was smiling. The results must have been positive. Achmed was a fellow Palestinian with a Jordanian passport, but he was also one of the Al Mauka'Al Sirri, the secret position, those honored to work in the clandestine service of Saddam Hussein. To outsiders these people didn't exist. Their work didn't exist. His factory purportedly produced pesticides.

Achmed was a top microbiologist whom Sharifah found especially interesting. He was tall with rugged good looks and he wore the latest Saville Row suits. He treated her with respect and often asked her professional opinion as a fellow biologist.

Sharifah and Hashim followed Achmed to his private office. As they entered, he gestured to his secretary to leave.

“Leila,” he called after her. “Send in Walid and Abraham.”

Achmed waited until Leila closed the door before beginning. “Please sit over here.” He motioned to a group of chairs in front of a television with a built-in VCR. The drapes in the office were drawn and the windows shuttered. No light penetrated from the outside.

“Military reports indicate the nerve gas results were outstanding. Better than we could ever have hoped for.” Achmed's eyes sparkled with pride.

“What of the biological bomb?” Sharifah asked.

Hashim gave her a sideways glance indicating he'd ask the questions.

“We've been puzzled by the Koreans' genetic research all along,” Achmed replied. He went to his desk and retrieved a large green loose-leaf binder. “Without an effective delivery system, altered genes are useless. Even if we doused people using our current retrovirus-based vectors, only those with skin breaks might be infected. You'll see the results from our recent field tests.”

“Can't you create a more effective delivery system?” Sharifah asked, ignoring her brother's cold stare.

“The North Koreans put most of their research into developing a delivery system, but it wasn't complete. Our laboratory tests are inconclusive. Frankly, I'm baffled.”

“And there are many more effective germ warfare agents,” Hashim interjected. “They're inexpensive to produce and easy to disperse.”

“But the West is well aware of these. And they're reasonably well equipped to combat them,” Achmed replied.

“Hashim, remember the speculation about the Brit's research facility at Leicester?” Sharifah nudged her brother. He gave her another look of disdain. “We think they're developing antidotes for biochemical warfare agents,” Sharifah added. She looked to Achmed for a response.

“Yes, yes,” Hashim jumped in. “And I'm sure the Americans are also up to speed on germ warfare. Achmed, do you think the Koreans are trying to produce new disease strains?”

“We can't find any direct link. Their focus was on altering cytokine genes. They used extensive human tests, but none of them resulted in fatalities. Not very effective on the battlefield.” Achmed shook his head and handed the green notebook to Hashim.

There was a sharp rap at the door. Walid and Abraham came into the office wearing white lab coats. Walid, the shorter of the two men and the eldest of the group, handed Achmed a video cassette.

Achmed slid the cassette into the VCR and everyone took seats. The screen came to life with an aerial view of a Russian Ilyushin transport plane. The date, time, and the name of a Kurdish village, Halabja, appeared on the bottom of the screen.

Then, in slow motion, a bomb dropped from the plane. About fifty meters above the village, the bomb, a binary chemical weapon, exploded. When separate chemicals in two chambers inside the bomb united, a large cloud erupted. The cloud quickly settled over the village as hundreds of villagers, men, women, and children, ran for shelter.

Almost as if an unseen hand had reached from the skies and grabbed them, the fleeing villagers stopped in their tracks, fell to the ground and began convulsing. Women with their babies wrapped in shawls crumbled to their knees. Their arms fell limp by their sides and the little bundles dropped onto the dusty earth. The bundles never moved. Dogs and cats collapsed in mid stride; their bodies quivered, then froze in tortured repose. Within thirty seconds, Halabja ceased to exist.

There was an eerie stillness on the tape as the photo plane banked and made a second pass. The only movement in the village was swirls of dust kicked up by the explosion, an ominous man-made sirocco.

After a silent pause, the television screen turned to snowy static. Then another village came into view from the same aircraft. Another bomb dropped and again the villagers ran for shelter after the explosion. A second dense fog descended on the village. The mist reflected the bright sunlight and cast a foreboding rainbow over the crude huts. Many villagers stumbled and fell while running to escape the perceived carnage. But no one began to convulse. No animals collapsed in mid stride or froze in tortured repose.

After a few minutes, doors opened and a few old men ventured out into the streets. They cautiously sniffed the air and rubbed their arms and faces. They looked up into the sky towards the plane. There were no outward signs of any effect on the village, but the faces of the men looked pained. They had surely heard of other villages and strange names like anthrax, botulism, tularemia, and bubonic plague. It could be a matter of hours or days before the chills, fever, vomiting, or boils appeared.

Sharifah glanced at the notebook that now lay open on Hashim's lap. Some of the chemical compounds resembled corticosteroids she had studied in a pharmacology course. A frightening thought emerged.

“Is it possible—”

Hashim grabbed Sharifah's wrist and held it firmly.

“Sorry, I suppose not,” she said weakly.

Sharifah lowered her eyes. But silently she decided to make a call to Oxfordshire in England. While in Linacre House at Oxford she had become friendly with another don who had completed a dissertation on immunosuppressant agents, and now she felt he might be useful.



AFTER THAT DAY in 1987 Sharifah secretly monitored the Kurds in that small village. They didn't die from any plague-like disease. In fact, over the coming months only three villagers who had experienced direct contact with the vapor cloud showed any effect at all. The viruses entered their bloodstream through breaks in the skin and inserted their genetic material into the chromosomes of the host cells. The victims suffered violent headaches and stomach pains. Hashim and Achmed ignored the medical reports as insignificant. They felt the genes had no potential as weapons. But for Sharifah it sparked the beginning of a plan with far greater potential than simply killing men on their playground of war.

Chapter 9

The Present – Tuesday, 6:30 P.M., Acela – D.C. to
Philadelphia

THE SKY OUTSIDE the Acela was awash in deepening shadows matching the fear that gripped Brett as he waited for Alicia to come to the phone.

“Brett—”

“Where’s Derrick? What happened?”

There was a moment of silence, then muffled sobs as his sister must have clamped her hand over the mouthpiece. Then Brett heard a deep gasping breath followed by “Oh God, Brett, Derrick’s dead.”

The next few seconds ticked away with maddening slowness. Flashes of his younger brother’s face shot across his vision in a horrid retrospective. “How . . . how did he die? The police? Alicia, what the hell happened?”

After a few struggled breaths, Alicia replied, “It was . . . an apparent murder/suicide.”

“Who killed Derrick? Why?”

The silence on the line heightened Brett’s fear. He felt the air being sucked from his lungs. *This couldn’t be happening.*

“No one.”

The words echoed in Brett’s skull as he stared in disbelief and saw the concern on Deborah’s face.

“I can be in Manhattan in a few hours.”

“Please, there’s nothing you can do.” Alicia paused, then her voice strengthened. “Father has taken charge. Derrick’s dead, nothing can bring him back. Father’s at the police station. His friend on the force will try to keep the whole thing low profile. He insisted I didn’t call you until after the interment on Thursday morning. Please, I beg you, for Derrick’s sake, don’t make this worse than it already is. Please.”

Brett closed his eyes trying to suppress the anger that was now bubbling through the torment and shock of Derrick’s death. After his mother’s death, he had written his father off as a sordid chapter in his life. Now Herbert Reynolds had risen again to meddle in the events relating to Derrick’s death.

“He’s back. I’ve got to hang up. Please understand.”

“Sis, I don’t want to make this worse for you. You must be going through hell. Call me when things settle down and you’re alone. I love you.”

Brett closed his cell phone and brought his hand to his lips. His fingers quivered and he balled them into a fist which he pressed against his mouth. His gut reaction was to rush to New York. To hell with Herbert. But that would only put Alicia in the middle. She didn’t deserve that. And what could he do? Nothing could bring Derrick back. Tomorrow he’d set up the emergency R3 communications links with the pharmaceutical companies. That might actually save lives. But, damn it, Thursday he’d be at Derrick’s inurnment. Alicia would just have to live with that.

When he looked up, Deborah was staring at him in disbelief.

“God, I’m sorry.” Deborah’s words were a mere whisper almost swallowed by the whoosh of the Acela.

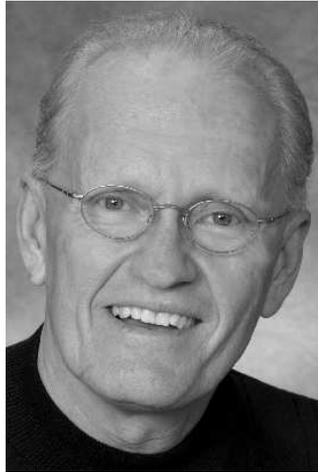


Photo by Al Paul

D. L. Wilson was president, CEO, and managing director of U.S. and European corporations and consultant to industries and governments in thirty-two countries. His extensive international travel spawned a fascination with world cultures and exotic locales. His first book, *The Kitchen Casanova—A Gentleman’s Guide to Gourmet Entertaining for Two*, resulted in a national book tour with features on CNN, Evening Magazine, and Regis & Kathy Lee. Wilson’s first novel, *Unholy Grail*, a Berkley religious thriller became a national bestseller and has been translated into eight languages. He and his wife, Miki, live in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and Baltimore County, Maryland.

Visit his website at www.dlwilsonbooks.com to order your copy of *SIROCCO*.