

PROLOGUE

Friday, February 10, 2017, 1830 hours Eastern Standard Time, West Virginia

He was next.

Hakim al-Husseini knew it deep within his bones, like he felt the cold that night. While the night air bit into his skin and chased away any feeling from his nose and fingers, the fear that he could die before his time chilled him all the way to his heart and soul. What else should he have expected when a dozen of his comrades had died mysterious deaths over the past two years?

He shook out a cigarette. With shaking hands, he lit it. The nicotine calmed him, and as he exhaled a stream into the frigid air, the tension in his shoulders dissipated a little.

Hakim stared into the darkness surrounding the Whispering Springs Resort. Another puff helped him shift his mind to why he stood outside of a cabin high on a mountain in West Virginia.

Lara.

A feminine silhouette paced in the lit picture window. She must have been talking to their children. An unwilling smile tipped his lips upward. Then he cast a glance at his watch.

Time to go.

He tossed the cigarette to the ground and squashed it out with the toe of his shoe.

Hakim shut the door behind him and laid his jacket across the back of the sofa. Before him, his wife paced as she chatted on her cell phone. “Make sure that Yacoub and Gabriel behave themselves and don’t stay up too late, okay? I don’t want Nana and Papa to have to be enforcers while we’re away.” She caught his eye and blew him a kiss. “I love you too, Nadia. How about put Nana back on for me?”

The delicate scent of lavender teased Hakim’s nose as he banked the fire for the night. He gazed at the woman clad in the little black dress that showed all of her curves. Only the few gray strands in her upswept dark hair and the fine lines around those gray eyes indicated how long they’d been married.

Twenty years.

Panama Deception

“I love you too, Mom. We’ll see you Monday. Tell Dad I love him.” Lara hung up and dropped her phone into her purse.

Hakim wasted no time in drawing her close. “Is everything quiet on the home front?” He nuzzled her hair and kissed her on her fair skin revealed by the twist.

“Hmmm. Keep that up, and we might not leave.” Then she sighed. “Yeah. Mom’s worried.”

He winced. So much for forgetting part of the reason why they’d planned this trip. “I know. So am I.”

“Isn’t there any way to go down in a couple of weeks or even next week and file the paperwork?”

“It’s not that easy.” The tightness returned to Hakim’s chest. “I wish it was, but—”

“I know. I know. You’re committed to the mission.” Lara shook off his embrace and grabbed her jacket from its peg.

“Ed’s got my back. I promise you on that. Please.” He stepped closer to her and tried not to notice how she draped her jacket over her arms like it was a shield. “Let’s remember why we’re here.”

“To get away from the stress, I know.”

He lifted his hand to her cheek. “Yes, that, but if I remember correctly, exactly twenty years ago at this time, I promised to you that I would be faithful to the very end.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. A trembling smile crossed her lips. “I never took you for the sentimental type.”

“I am when it comes to you.” He kissed her.

At first, she tried to pull back, but then she leaned into him and brushed her hand across the back of his neck.

He seriously considered canceling their reservations for seven o’clock.

“Maybe we should stay here,” he murmured against her lips. “You know, call out for pizza or something.”

Lara giggled. “And miss our reservations at Gregory’s? I’m just as sentimental as you.”

Hakim took her coat and held it for her. “Then let’s go.”

They stepped into the night, and he locked the front door. The lights of his Jeep Grand Cherokee flashed twice as he unlocked the doors. He held the passenger door for her. “M’lady?”

She slid inside and buckled her belt. Once he started the SUV, he backed out of the driveway and pulled onto the road. Snowflakes drifted across the windshield. “It should be good skiing weather tomorrow. How many slopes do you want to hit?”

“As many as we can.” The soft glow of the dashboard lights lit Lara’s face. “But, I’m also up to coming back early and being a ski bunny.”

“Nadia would be jealous since she loves to ski.” Hakim fell silent as they stopped where the road dead-ended at the winding two-lane highway. “Next year, when I’m retired, I’m going to go skiing with her as much as I can. It’ll be good to spend time with her since she’ll be a senior.”

Panama Deception

“Yacoub and Gabriel will also enjoy having you around. Gabriel wants to race BMX in the spring, you know. And summer. I guess I’ll have to haul him around for just a few more months.”

“Until the first of July.” Hakim fell silent as the road steepened. The night before when he’d made a late-night run to the drugstore, he’d noticed ice, especially on the curve up ahead. He pressed on the brakes.

Nothing happened.

His heart began pounding.

“You might want to slow down,” Lara said.

“I’m trying.” He pushed the brakes harder. They went all the way to the floor. Hakim gripped the wheel tighter.

“Hakim!” Lara’s husky voice rose an octave.

“The brakes are shot!”

The sharp curve to the right appeared in the headlights. He yanked on the emergency brake.

Nothing.

“We’re going too fast!”

Hakim threw the SUV into first gear, but when he tried to navigate the turn, they skidded on the ice. Lara screamed as they tore through the steel guardrail and plunged into the gorge.

He thought it was a strange feeling to plummet to his death. Like being on a rollercoaster on that first big hill. His stomach dropped. An unearthly voice filled the air. Maybe his?

Then came the impact and the crunch of metal.

Then nothing.

Panama Deception

Day 1

Sunday, June 11, 2017

1

1215 hours Eastern Daylight Time, Panama City, Panama

The Honda motorcycle wove in and out of traffic as it sped down the wide boulevard toward downtown with controlled fury. Salsa music blared from the small radio on the instrument cluster.

Ahead, the traffic signal flashed to yellow and red.

Jabir muttered under his breath as he came to a stop behind a pickup truck with tires stacked so high in the bed that he feared he'd be buried beneath them if the load gave way. He flipped up the visor of his helmet and stared at the clock below the radio.

He was late.

Ed didn't tolerate lateness.

Jabir scowled at the signal. One hand massaged the throttle while the other clamped onto the brake.

The light turned.

He shot forward and slipped around the lumbering pickup before darting between an old Ford minivan and a Cadillac Escalade.

The driver of the Cadillac honked and flipped him the bird.

Jabir didn't care.

Five blocks ahead of him, Hotel Panama loomed, its windows glittering in the bright sunlight like sirens luring their sailors to a rocky death. On his left, a large cathedral came into view.

At a break in the traffic, a policeman stepped into the road. He held up a white-gloved hand.

Jabir muttered under his breath. He had no choice but to stop since winding up in jail would make Ed even unhappier than he already was. Cars flooded onto the hot pavement from the cathedral, so many that he wondered how many people it held.

Panama Deception

Finally, the policeman neatly turned on his heel ninety degrees and began waving people through.

Jabir gunned the engine and wasted no time in racing to the hotel. He cut across the path of an oncoming bus and truck, once more earning blaring horns as a reward. After parking the motorcycle under a low-spreading palm, he locked his helmet before running his hands through his hair. Sweat shot out in a spray.

His phone began chiming.

More sweat trickled down his back as he checked the Caller ID.

Abdel.

“Abdel, hey.”

“Where are you, buddy?”

“I just got here. I’ll be there as soon as I can get into the building.”

“Alrighty, then.” Abdel’s Texan drawl did nothing to reassure him. “Ed’s grumbling about kicking you off the team.”

Jabir’s heart almost seized.

“Just kidding. But he’s getting antsy.”

“I hear you.” Jabir opened the side door to the hotel with his key card. “Give me two.”

He hung up and dashed up the fire stairs to the fifth floor. Room 524 was eight doors down on his left. He inserted the key into the lock. The bolt clicked back, and he slipped inside. Almost total darkness greeted him.

“Good that you could join us.” That comment came from the man sitting at the worktable pushed against the wall. He turned, and the pale light from the screens of the laptops reflected off his reading glasses. He popped open a bag of Cheetos and tossed one into his mouth.

As Jabir’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, he recognized Abdel lounging in the easy chair under the golden glow of the one lamp on in the room. Ari sprawled on the couch in front of the window. Bright noonday sun fought to permeate the closed drapes. Stephen sat on the other end. Jabir noticed the way he slid the Beretta he held under a pillow.

“Take a load off,” Ed told him. Reaching into the cooler resting at the foot of the bed, he pulled out an icy bottle and tossed it to Jabir. “What took you so long?”

“I got caught in traffic, including a mass exodus.”

“A what?” Stephen frowned at him.

“A mass exodus.” Jabir unscrewed the top and took a swig. The icy water cooled his worries and quenched his thirst. “The cathedral up the road five blocks let out from Mass just as I got to the intersection. I don’t think it would’ve been too wise to try and run over a cop.”

He seated himself on the cooler.

Stephen snickered. “Good one.”

“Good one what?” This came from Ari.

“Pun, silly. Mass exodus. Ha!” Abdel chuckled.

Panama Deception

“Enough of that, gentlemen. Let’s do a final briefing.” Ed spun around in his chair so he faced the small circle. “I’ll start with an update. As you know, Samir Kamil is scheduled to come and close on the property a week from Tuesday on the twentieth.”

Everyone nodded.

“It looks like things might have changed.”

“What?” Jabir frowned and rested his bottle on his knee.

“Since Finch, May, and Gilbert has been preparing the contract, we’ve been tracking the attorney’s e-mails. And it seems as if Ms. Forrest has now been requested to come and do the walkthrough rather than the local attorney.”

“What are your thoughts on that?” Stephen asked.

“I think she smells a rat. Melanie Forrest is no dummy.”

“Or someone tipped her off.” Stephen rubbed his chin.

“Probably. And they were smart enough to keep it quiet and off the e-mail until Ms. Forrest contacted the engineer who’ll be assisting her. Regardless, she’s going to see that property, and she’s going to realize her boy Samir has been lying to her over the past four or so months.” Ed shook his head. “Knowing that, guess what? Plan B is now becoming more of a reality.”

Jabir swallowed hard. He’d always hated Plan B. It made him nervous and sick to his stomach.

“With that being said, I want to go over our status and roles in this op for Plan B. Al-Omri, what do you have?”

Jabir began ticking through his duties in his head. He’d secured the safe house. Thanks to his recent efforts, he had enough nonperishable food to last for quite a while. And water—

“Al-Omri!”

The sharpness in Ed’s voice told him one thing. He’d been thinking too long.

“Sorry. The safe house is ready. The only thing we need to do is to move the food and water we’ve collected up there tomorrow.”

“Good. And your tasks for the snatch?”

“I’ll keep surveillance in the lobby and make sure Melanie gets to her room.”

“And you’ll disguise yourself. No need in making Ms. Forrest think twice about you. And then?”

“After the closing, I’ll scope her out tomorrow night in the bar.”

Abdel yawned as if feigning boredom. “My money says she’ll be at the outdoor bar.”

“Huh?” Jabir frowned.

“Five says she’s not a big fan of over air-conditioned buildings and will try to drink away her worries in a tropical setting where she can at least imagine she’s on vacation.” Abdel grinned.

“Anyone in?”

“Pass, thanks.”

Ed cleared his throat. “Moving on. You’re on the snatch team with me, al-Omri. And you’ve got a critical piece. Ms. Forrest has a heart condition, right?”

Jabir nodded as he recalled the dossier Ed had built on their target. “Cardiomyopathy.”

Panama Deception

“Right.” Ed leaned forward and pinned him in his sharp gaze. “You’re to make sure we’ve got her medication. A dead hostage would end our ride real quick, wouldn’t it?”

Jabir shuddered.

Ed sat back. “Karesh, your status.”

“Right.” Stephen straightened. “I’ve gotten her room set up in the hotel’s reservation system to be Room 748. It’s not next to the stairwell like we wanted, but it’s close. Two doors down. And I’m going to help Abdel get the bug placed. Then assist Jabir in finalizing things at the safe house.”

“Excellent.” Ed nodded. “Al-Rashid?”

“Right-o. So like Stephen said, I’ll be doing the bug. Then I’ll head down to the pool to catch some sunbathing beauties—Ow!” Abdel scowled at Ari and rubbed his shin where his friend had kicked him. “What was that for?”

“On task.” Ari eyed him with mock sternness.

“Okay. No, seriously, I’ll be backup here in case anything goes down and will get the room cleaned up when we swing into action.”

Ed nodded. “And you’re the man in charge of the gear bag. You and Karesh will be waiting for us in the van when we come out. Rosen, you’re on.”

Ari leaned forward and rested his muscled forearms on his knees. “I’m following Melanie. I’ve got the taxi ready and a couple of disguises in case she wises up.”

“Ten says she’s clueless.” Abdel grinned.

“What got you into a betting mood?” Jabir asked.

“Man, I’m going to Vegas when we get back. I’ve got to get my betting money from somewhere. Anyone in?”

“Pass,” all four men chorused.

“Poopers.” Abdel tossed his empty bottle at Stephen, who batted it away.

“Back on task, gentlemen.” Ed’s voice cut into their fun. “Rosen?”

Ari nodded. “I’m on the snatch crew with you and Jabir.”

“Right.” Ed turned and glanced at one of the laptops. “I’ll be up here keeping an eye on things until we’re ready to move. I imagine Ms. Forrest will be presenting a negative report, and it doesn’t take a genius to realize what her client’s going to do. And I’ll be on the snatch crew. Good. Sounds like we’re locked and loaded. Any questions?”

Jabir bit his lip. His stomach knotted as he thought about what the snatch meant.

The kidnapping of an American citizen.

He opened his mouth to protest, to say that he thought what they were planning was unethical at best, illegal at worst, and that he wasn’t comfortable at all with the prospect.

“Son, is something bothering you?” Ed focused on him. The pale light from the laptops bleached his gray eyes so much that he seemed like some sort of evil spirit.

Jabir shivered. Then he shook his head. “No. Nothing.”

Panama Deception

“All right. Dismissed until tomorrow. Rosen, Ms. Forrest lands at eleven, so be prepared.” Ed pulled up an e-mail they’d intercepted. “A Señor del Fuente will be meeting her at the airport. Get on him like stink on a dog first thing tomorrow.”

“Roger that.”

“I’ll see you all later.” Jabir jumped up.

“Hot date?” Abdel grinned.

“No. It’s time for me to hit the gym. Later, guys.” Jabir escaped from the room and into the stairwell. Once there, he leaned against the wall and rested his head against the slick cinderblock.

Words from Tiny, his boss at the Department of Homeland Security’s Unit 28, haunted him. “Your mission is to get enough evidence to determine whether or not Ed DuBois is the killer of the CIA’s senior native Arabic speakers. CIA IAD can’t move unless we get something definitive. Get close to him, but watch your back. You’ll be operating on your own out there.”

Jabir turned, fled down the stairs, and dashed through the parking lot.

As he cranked his motorcycle and sped toward the gym, more of his conversation with Tiny echoed in his ears. “The guy you’re replacing was killed along with his wife in an auto accident in West Virginia. With your background, you were a perfect candidate for the job.”

“Thanks, Tiny,” Jabir muttered under his breath as he thought about the leader of the snatch.

“I worked with Ed in Afghanistan,” Tiny had told him that February day. “He’s someone who’s always operated in the gray. The question remains as to how dark a gray.”

Once Jabir arrived at the gym, he jumped rope to release some nervous energy. Then he moved on to the speed bag. The look he’d seen in Ed’s eyes made his fists go through the motions to the point where the bag was almost a blur. Some of the last advice Tiny gave him before he departed the office came back to him in a flash. “Whatever you do, don’t ever question Ed’s authority. He hates that and won’t tolerate it.”

Jabir muttered, cocked his fist, and rammed it into the speed bag. It came off its mooring and flew into a corner. Flushing, he glanced around. At least no one had seen his actions. He paced in a tight circle, hands on his hips, chest heaving, as both his body and his temper cooled. Jabir lifted his chin and closed his eyes as he realized the enormity of the next several hours.

If things went as planned, he would have willingly participated in the kidnapping of an American citizen.

2

1645 hours Eastern Daylight Time, Weatherly, North Carolina

Furious fists beat the punching bag in rhythm to the pounding of Pink's "So What?" screaming through the ear buds. An occasional kick punctuated the anger flowing through Alex.

All thanks to James Ray and his idiotic methods of breaking up. At the thought of him, another hot layer of anger ripped through her. She delivered a hard roundhouse kick that sent the bag twirling on its rope.

A guy caught it. He grinned and said something.

Alex yanked the ear buds out, and merciful silence descended around her. "What?"

"Nice kick." Josh Thornton, her next-down brother, held the bag and grinned at her. "I figured you'd be blowing off some steam here at Joe's."

"What makes you say that?"

"Mom says you bolted out of church like your tail was on fire. You weren't home. Diana didn't know where you were, and you didn't answer your cell. My next logical chain of thought before I called the police was that since it's so hot out, you came to Joe's."

Alex slid into her boxer's pose and began bouncing on her toes. This time, Josh held the bag as she delivered a flurry of jabs. She imagined it was James's face. "So?"

"What happened?"

"James Ray is what happened." She delivered a cross punch that made Josh stagger. Then she stopped and brushed back the wisps of dark hair that had slipped from the stubby ponytail of her pageboy cut. Breathing heavily, she wandered to the bench where she'd dropped her water bottle and towel. Alex collapsed onto it and began unwinding the tape from her hands. "He broke up with me. On my first day of vacation, nonetheless."

Josh settled beside her and raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah. By text." Alex scowled. "The jerk didn't even have the courage for a phone call, let alone a face-to-face conversation."

Panama Deception

She took a pull on her bottle and mopped her face with a towel that had the motto “Keep calm and carry on” embroidered on it.

“Probably for the best.”

“Maybe. It’s just...” Unexpected tears flooded her eyes as the rejection stung again like an angry wasp.

Josh put his arm around her shoulders. “Hey, forget about him.”

He gazed at her for a moment as she dabbed at the corner of her eyes and tried to pretend they stung from the sweat. “This runs deeper, doesn’t it?”

Alex hated that he was right. After a moment, she blurted, “I feel like a loser.”

He didn’t say a word.

“I mean, I can’t keep a guy. I was stupid, ran off, got married and divorced, all within three months.”

“You were in crisis.”

“Hah. That’s one way to put it, I guess.” Memories from four years ago swarmed around her. She released a shuddering breath. “And while I paid for the ‘crime’ of our mission, Jabir got away scot-free.”

Josh pulled back and studied her. She wondered what ran through his head. Maybe something like how ungrateful she was for grouching about his taking her in when she’d retreated to her hometown or the way his then-contractor and now-wife had offered her a job working at with her to renovate his house even when Alex had no experience. He said neither.

He stood. “Mom wanted me to tell you she’s fixing supper and for you to be there at six. And I think Joe’s ready to close.” He nodded toward where the owner stood at the door, a ring of keys dangling from his fingers. “Clean up, and we’ll see you in an hour.”

Alex rose and watched him go. Suddenly tired, she heaved a sigh, gathered her bag from the locker room, and bid Joe goodbye. Maybe Josh was right. Maybe it was for the better, this cowardly breakup with James. Then the hurt rose up inside of her as she thought about his text.

It’s not you. It’s me.

Whatever.

She scowled, wrenched open the back door of her yellow four-door Jeep Wrangler, and tossed her gym bag onto the backseat.

As she opened her door to climb inside, her cell began chiming. She checked Caller ID. Melanie Forrest, the guest of honor for the upcoming bachelorette week in Costa Rica. “Melanie, hey.”

“Hey, girl.” Melanie’s southern drawl conjured memories of the Fantabulous Four as youngsters sitting in the woods and feasting on the sweetness of honeysuckle blossoms. “How’s it going?”

“Fair to middlin’.” Before she could stop herself, Alex sighed.

“Hmmm. I’m not so sure about that. What was that sigh about?”

In short, clipped sentences, Alex explained the breakup. “I mean, I feel like such a loser.”

Panama Deception

“Why would you say that?” Melanie’s concern radiated all the way from Manhattan to Weatherly.

“You know. I mean, I can’t seem to keep a boyfriend. I lost a good career even though I was simply doing my job. My marriage lasted three months. And Jabir.” Alex’s eyes filled as she paced in small circles next to the Jeep. “I’m sorry. You’d think that four years after everything happened, I’d be over it and happy here in Weatherly.”

Melanie was quiet for a moment after she let her friend wind down. “Sometimes things take longer to process than we anticipate. You haven’t talked to him?”

“Don’t you remember? He deserted me and tried to make nice about it.” Alex narrowed her eyes as she thought back to that warm March day two years before. “I told you about how he sent that letter. And I returned it without opening it. So no, I haven’t talked to him.” She leaned against the Jeep’s fender. “The problem is, I still feel hollow.”

“Oh, Alex.”

“It was two years too late. I’m done with him. Our friendship ended when he deserted me.”

Liar.

“Anyway, how are you? *Where* are you?” Alex added when she heard her friend murmur something.

“I’m at a Mexican restaurant in Manhattan waiting on Samir Kamil to show up.”

“Wait. Samir, as in ex-flame-from-law-school Samir?” Alex waved as Joe locked the gym’s doors and headed to a pickup truck.

“Yeah. His company is a client of my firm, and since he’s general counsel and my firm’s the outside counsel, I guess you could say he’s my client. He’s been in the Hamptons for two and a half weeks on vacation and wanted to see me.” Her voice petered out. After a moment, she said, “I’m worried about him.”

“How so?”

“Noor, his sister who’s also COO of their company, called me about ten days ago. She wanted to meet, so we met at my condo one evening and had supper. Samir didn’t know about that.”

“And that’s worrisome why?”

“I think he might be mixed up in something. Something bad. That’s what she wanted to talk about.”

“Like?”

Melanie sighed. “I don’t know. And that’s what bothers me. You see, my company’s doing an audit on the books for Kamil International. And Kamil International’s also getting ready to buy a property in Panama City.”

“Which is why you’re going there tomorrow.” Alex reached into the small cooler she kept in the back and extracted a Gatorade.

“Right. Not to get into too many details, but apparently, someone spotted some discrepancies in their finances that were enough to request a forensic audit. And, his father, who’s president of the company, wants me to do the final walkthrough as well as the closing, which isn’t normal procedure. I guess I’m worried. Will you pray for me?”

Panama Deception

Despite the heat outside, Alex felt a flush starting in her cheeks. “Um...”

“Look. I know you and God aren’t exactly on speaking terms right now, but I’d appreciate it.”

“Okay.” Alex swallowed hard.

For her friend, she would.

Maybe.

“So long as you’ll pray for me,” she added with a weak attempt at levity in her voice.

“Always. Have you talked with Becca and Ellie?”

“Not yet. I’m going to call them tonight after supper.”

“Look at it this way. You’re the one who can flirt with the guys and have some fun. Maybe that’s what you need.”

“True.” The barest traces of a smile lifted Alex’s lips as she thought about how they’d planned this trip ever since Melanie had gotten engaged the summer before.

“He’s here. Oh, and pray that I somehow figure out how to tell him I’m engaged.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“Not yet. It’s complicated.”

Alex knew all about complicated.

“Send me your flight info too,” she hastily added.

“Will do. See you soon, Alex.” With that, Melanie hung up.

Alex shoved her phone into her purse and climbed behind the wheel.

She cranked the engine and turned the air conditioner on full blast.

As she turned her wheels toward her flat at the center of town, her thoughts roved through what she knew.

It sounded like both she and Melanie needed a vacation.

Big time.

She could only hope that days spent on pristine beaches and nights spent dancing would wipe away the feelings of failure that still stalked her.

And memories of Jabir.

If they didn’t, she didn’t know what she’d do.

3

1830 hours Eastern Daylight Time, Manhattan, New York City, New York

The sleek black Corvette cruised beneath streetlights beginning to glow in the artificial dusk created by the urban canyon of Manhattan. Techno music pulsed from the speakers, and Samir enjoyed the feel of the summer breeze whispering through his hair, the rumble of the eight-cylinder engine, and the rich aroma of freshly polished leather. It was a man's car, one that made him feel powerful and worthy.

He slowed to a stop under the Aztec portico of the Mexican restaurant. A valet met him at the curb. After cutting off the engine, Samir climbed from the seat before handing off the keys. "Take good care of it, and there might be something for you."

He strolled into the restaurant.

Melanie had said she'd be on the patio.

His gaze swung to the hostess. "I am meeting my friend on the patio. Perhaps she told you I was coming?"

She smiled. "Tall? Blonde? Last name of Forrest?"

"That's her."

"This way, please." She turned and led the way through the cool tile interior and onto a patio of slate.

Samir's heart caught when he noticed Melanie sitting at the table, her phone to her ear, a half-empty margarita in front of her. The short skirt and sleeveless blouse highlighted the tanned legs and toned arms he remembered from so long ago.

Her gaze met his, and she ended her call. She stood. "Samir, it's good to see you."

Samir pulled her into a light embrace and kissed both of her cheeks as her perfume teased his nose with the pleasant scent of lavender and many memories of her waking up in his arms. He released her. "Melanie, you are beautiful as always. A year has been too long."

"You make me blush." A smile flickered across her face. "Please, have a seat. My apologies for ordering a drink already, but I arrived early."

Panama Deception

“And I apologize for my tardiness.” Samir settled across the table from her. “Traffic was a bit heavy coming back into town.”

“Where were you?”

He ordered his own margarita and set the drink menu on the burnished wood of the table. “I was in the Hamptons finishing a two-week vacation. The entire family went to a cousin’s wedding there.”

“When are you headed to Beirut?”

“After I leave here, I’ll be flying on our private jet back to Beirut. Everyone else decided to linger a little longer on the coast and will meet me at the airport. Please. Enough of that.” Samir picked up a glossy menu and studied it. “Let’s decide what we want.”

Once they’d ordered their meals along with another margarita for Melanie, she leaned forward. “Tell me about this property of yours.”

“What is there to tell?” He shrugged. “It is a good piece of property that is perfect for the needs of the company and our potential client.”

She cocked her head. “How so?”

“You do not know?”

“I’m a lawyer, not a mind reader.” She smiled, but it faded.

Unease uncurled deep in Samir’s gut.

“I can make suppositions, but I’d like to hear it in your words.” She sipped her drink.

Samir fell silent for a moment as he recalled the story he’d rehearsed and provided so many times over the past few months. “You know we have operations all over the world in major ports. Hong Kong. Singapore. Mumbai. New York. Marseilles. Name the port, we are there. Save for Central and South America. We have been looking for suitable property in that part of the world for a long time, you see.”

Melanie nodded.

“We have found properties in Rio de Janeiro on the Atlantic side, but we are still struggling on the Pacific side.”

“Nothing in Mexico?”

“Papa is leery of Mexico and for good reason.” Samir leaned back and crossed his legs, anything to project an image of confidence.

“True. I’d be leery too until things calm down a bit.”

“Panama City offers us a large port on one of the busiest canals in the world and on the Pacific Ocean.”

“How’d you hear about the property?”

“Why all of the questions?” Samir asked.

“I’m curious. I mean, I’ve been working on the contract since late January, but I’ve never heard of how you came to know about it.”

“An associate of mine informed me about it.” He leaned forward. “It is the way we do business sometimes. Clients of ours, who either want to work with us further or know us from other ports oftentimes want us to move into another area on their behalf.”

Panama Deception

“Care to share who?”

“No.” He couldn’t tell her that Tarek had informed him one night shortly after the New Year about Jihad of Light’s desire to have the property. “This associate is considering a renewal. Call it a trade secret. The thing that would tip it in our favor to win the renewal is for us to have operations in Panama City.”

“I see. Has Noor been there?”

“No, no.” Why was she asking so many questions? Samir scrambled for an answer that would make sense. “She has been very busy lately. We are considering a reorganization of our operations structure, and as COO, she has been overseeing that with no time for extraneous travel. I told her about the property and showed her photographs my associate sent me. She said it looked like a viable opportunity, and if I thought it would add another client, then I was to proceed with the purchase.”

Melanie studied him for a moment. “No one from Kamil International has surveyed the property?”

“No.”

“Samir.” She began shaking her head.

The unease wound its way into his heart. He tried a smile. “Melanie, Melanie. I have been busy as well, you understand. Before vacation? I was in Cape Town. Then Mumbai. Then over to Singapore before heading to Beijing and back to Beirut. It has been like that ever since the New Year. You must understand that sometimes, I have to rely on the opinion of others even if they are not from my company.”

Melanie remained silent for a moment. Then she sighed and shook her head. “I do. I understand that. But as a lawyer specializing in real estate transactions of very high dollar, I’d be remiss in my duties not to ask questions. Before our food arrives, let’s finish our business.” She reached into her briefcase and pulled out her tablet. She touched it a few times and laid it on the table to reveal photographs. “I think we’ve reviewed the contract *ad nauseum*, and all of your assets and debts have been properly accounted for. These are the photographs you forwarded to me. Close to a hundred. Thank you for that.”

Samir pulled his chair closer so he could see them. Once more, her perfume induced heady memories of having her by his side during their law school romance. “Yes, those are what I sent you.”

“From what I’ve been able to tell, it looks like a pretty decent property, though maybe a bit small. Why’s that?”

“Because we have one potential client, not several. We could grow if need be.”

Melanie raised an eyebrow as if she doubted every word he’d said. “At least Kamil International can purchase it for cash and not incur anymore debt.” She slid the tablet into her handbag.

Samir stayed where he was, their shoulders almost touching. He wanted to take her hand, but he didn’t dare. “They will do the walkthrough this week, and I will fly in and meet you for the closing next week. Correct?”

Panama Deception

Melanie bit her lip. She refused to meet his gaze. Then she did. Her brow had knitted, and she surveyed him with such an intense look that he feared she could see into the dirty depths of his soul.

“I’m going to conduct the walkthrough.”

Samir’s heart nearly seized. “What?” He blinked. “But why? Isn’t that such a long ways for you to go? And then to return the following week for the closing?”

“Not when I’m headed in that direction for vacation.”

“I don’t understand. Why?” His pulse hammered in his ears.

Somehow, she must have discovered the truth.

He sat straighter and leaned away from her.

“Your father asked me to do so. I accepted since he personally requested it. It’s no problem. Really. I mean, I’m going to Costa Rica for vacation, and it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Is that normal?”

“If we have offices in the country, we let the client decide. We don’t have offices in Panama, so our San Jose office contracted it out to a Panamanian firm we use when dealing with clients in that country. They did all of the legwork to prepare the contract on the Panamanian end of things. Most of the time for the walkthrough, we use the local attorneys. But sometimes, our clients specially request someone from the home office to do so. As president of Kamil International, your father requested it, so I’m going. Why is that such a big deal?”

“It is not. I guess I was...” Samir fought to maintain his composure. “I was surprised. That is all.”

He gulped his margarita and winced as it stung going down.

Melanie began twisting a ring on her left ring finger. “I’ll complete the walkthrough and send you, Noor, and Farouk a report the same day. Based on that report, Kamil International has the option of backing out of the contract. You’d lose your earnest money, but it’d be better than the amount it would take to purchase the property.”

“True.” Samir sighed. Something or someone had tipped off Papa, and Samir had no choice but to acquiesce. To protest further would have made Melanie more suspicious. “I’m sorry. It’s just that usually an associate doesn’t conduct the walkthrough, correct?”

“Like I said, it depends.” She resumed twisting. “I promise that if your father decides to go through with the closing, I’ll be there with you.”

Suddenly, Samir noticed her actions. “Melanie, you...is that...”

“What?”

“Your ring. You are engaged?”

The flush began as a delicate pink at the open neck of her blouse. It began working its way up her neck. “Um, yeah.”

“Since when?” His eyes widened.

“Last year. Rick proposed to me while we vacationed in Hawaii over my birthday.” She spread her left hand on the table, and the solitaire sparkled in the fading sunlight.

“It is very beautiful.” He choked that out.

Panama Deception

Melanie smiled. “Thank you. We’re marrying in the middle of August. I’ll be with the firm through the end of July.”

“You’re leaving us?”

“Leaving the firm. And yes, I guess leaving Kamil International as a client. Look.” Melanie sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. It’s been...awkward. Since we were so serious in law school, you know.

“Please, Samir.” She reached out to touch him on the arm but instead almost knocked over her margarita glass. He steadied it as she continued, “Rick and I thought about what to do when we married. He could move here, which he most definitely didn’t want to do. We could have two ‘homes,’ one here in Manhattan and one in Atlanta, but we agreed it was pointless to do something like that. Honestly, I’m fine with leaving Manhattan. It’s crowded. Expensive. Cold as heck in the winter. I’m planning on starting at the first of the year with a firm down there that does real estate law and estate planning. I’m fine with that. Really.”

Hurt stole his appetite. What should he have expected three years before when Melanie became their outside counsel? Especially after over five years of separation and the way she’d failed to reciprocate when he’d tried to rekindle their romance?

Once they had their food, Samir probed her with questions about her fiancé. In his mind, he surpassed Rick in every aspect of life. He was richer. More handsome. In a more important job. Melanie could do better than to marry someone involved in what she called a ministry.

Melanie remained guarded. When he brushed her hand accidentally on purpose, she withdrew it. She refused a third margarita that could help him convince her to go with him for the night. Finally, she rose and insisted that she needed to get home since she had to rise at four the next morning.

When they walked outside, Samir handed the valet his ticket. Then he shoved his hands into the pockets of his khakis. Melanie remained beside him, clutching her purse. She offered him a tremulous smile that did nothing to comfort him.

Finally, Samir sighed. “This is it?”

“I’m afraid so.” Melanie met his gaze for a second and glanced away. When she looked back at him, he thought he saw tears pooling in those blue eyes he loved. “Honestly, we were so long ago. I’ve changed a whole lot since then. You have too. It’s just that...”

She closed her mouth.

The valet pulled up in the Corvette. He hopped out and accepted the fifty from Samir. Then he left them alone.

Samir turned to her. “So, perhaps one last kiss goodbye?”

“Um...probably not a good idea. I’m engaged, you know.” Melanie took the tiniest step back.

“Then at least accept this.” He took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and kissed her fingers. “Know I will always love you. And I’m happy for you. Truly.”

The lie sent a bolt of pain through his heart.

“Thanks.”

“Do you need a ride to your condo?”

Panama Deception

“Thanks, but no.” A tremulous smile crossed her lips and faded. “I’m going to walk. It’s too nice a night not to.”

“Then adieu.” With that, he climbed into the sports car. Suddenly, he hated the rich purr of the engine and the heady aroma of the leather seats.

He eased forward. At the first break in traffic, he hit the gas. The tires chirped as he pulled in front of a Mercedes. The restaurant quickly receded in the distance.

If only Melanie’s memory would do the same.

And the trouble he suddenly faced.

Because he knew that once she presented the report to the rest of his family members, her final rejection of him might be the least of his problems.