

THE PERFECT WEAPON

A *LANCE PRIEST* NOVEL

CHRISTOPHER
METCALF

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For Ann
(a few lucky people call her Mom)

*We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the
dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are
afraid of the light.*

— Plato or Socrates
or some other dead Greek philosopher

*Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned*
— W. Congreve

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Friday, February 26, 1993

The billowing smoke was evidence of what could have been. The buildings still stood. Was it luck? Did they not put enough explosives in the truck? Whatever the reason, they had completed their mission. Their ultimate goal may not have been realized, but they had succeeded in declaring war on the United States.

Prologue

Lonely was the killer.

Taking a life with the precise slash of a razor sharp blade is a lonesome practice. Solitary. A select few know the feeling, the sensation of holding a writhing body as it gives up its last breaths. Gives up its life.

Looking the subject square in the eyes is a must in those last moments. The killer must accept the responsibility. The severity of the crimes committed by the subject matters not during these final seconds. Hatred, revulsion and loathing must be tamed. Set aside. The professional takes over.

This target had done despicable acts. He earned this death a hundred times over, maybe a thousand. In his lust for power, he had elevated cruelty to unparalleled levels. He'd stolen, blackmailed, threatened, stripped others of their tenuous hold on humanity. He had nearly achieved his malevolent goals. Nearly. The killer was summoned to rid the world of this menace and protect those in immediate danger. But not until negotiations failed. The target was bargained with, pleaded with and had been begged to reconsider his plans. All to no avail. A line had been crossed and there was no recourse. No options. This was a pre-emptive, preventative action. Eliminate one to save the lives of many.

The killer was new to this life, but had all requisite skills. This assignment would be a success because failure was unacceptable. In time, this kill would take its place next to others -- many, many others. But for now, execution was called for.

Silently, the killer followed the target through the frozen night. The destination was clear. He was headed to the abandoned warehouse he considered his secret lair. It was the heart of his evil kingdom. His throne was a crate turned on its side. His loyal subjects were rats and other vermin scurrying into corners. The target would observe their black eyes and find them comforting as he smoked stolen cigarettes while seated on his throne.

The killer stayed 60 feet behind and across the deserted late evening street as the subject trudged through knee-deep, and sometimes waist-deep, snow. The shimmering, yet smothering, blanket of white made the night even quieter. The killer expertly kept close to the houses and apartments on the other side of the street, moving from shadow to shadow. It wasn't much farther now.

The low clouds in the night sky reflected the lights of the dismal inner city. The diffused light from this reflection provided more than enough illumination for the killer to see the rise and fall of the subject's boots; the hunched shoulders and bobbing hooded head. The target was oblivious to his watcher, his hunter. His confidence was evident in the blasé pattern and cadence of his walk. Even struggling through snow this deep, his arrogance was evident.

As expected, the subject turned on the street that led to his castle just a quarter mile ahead. In that quarter mile, the buildings thinned out. Houses were left behind and thick growths of trees with branches reached out on either side of the road, creating a tunnel of sorts, even in the depths of winter. The killer assumed the target fantasized about walking

triumphantly across the drawbridge and through the gates of his fantasy walled city. The killer had come to know this subject intimately through days of observation. In actuality, this target was not a stranger. The killer knew more about him than others would, or even could.

The warehouse had been abandoned nearly three decades earlier. Its brick façade had crumbled in many places. Any windows that remained were broken. The floor was dirt, reminiscent of its pre-1900 construction. Sagging metal girders were rusted but still strong enough to support the structure after hundreds of winters and thousands of feet of snow piled on top throughout its history.

Once inside, a match dimly lit the subject's face as he bent to sit on the crate in the center of the empty carcass of a building. A cigarette's orange pinpoint glow followed the match. The expanse of the open space was dark otherwise. The killer stood amid deep shadows just inside the door. Less than 50 feet separated hunter and prey. After 30 seconds, the killer's eyes adjusted to the dark. Death was only moments away.

The killer removed a glove. A bare right hand reached into the right pocket of the thick winter coat. Inside, the knife waited. The pocket kept it warm. It was much easier to handle, more pliable to the grip. The serrated blade measured seven inches in length. During its life, it had cleaned fish, deer, moose and even bear. It was a simple, timeless tool that had been maintained in a respectful manner. A hunter knows to keep the blade sharp at all times.

A silent exhale of frozen breath cleared the killer's mind. Like a ghost, the killer moved toward the kill, circling around behind to come at an angle. The strike could be from above, from a position lateral to the target's neck or from below, rising up through the diaphragm into the chest. With the killer two steps away, the target removed the cigarette from his mouth

and brought his right hand down to his knee. The entire target zone was now open. The killer chose the lateral entry.

The blade sliced through the dark of night and into the right side of the target's neck. It was a vicious, violent blow. The entire blade entered the target's throat severing arteries, tendons and esophagus. The blow carried the target backward, off the crate to the dirt floor. The killer placed a gloved left hand over the target's mouth and a knee in his chest.

The deed was done. There would be no recovery from this mortal wound. Just inches separated their two faces. Darkness had taken everything now. The subject sputtered. Blood flowed freely as the killer kept the knife in place, inside the subject's throat. A few moments of life remained. The killer tore the blade free from the ruined neck and rose to a standing position.

The next action was necessary for satisfaction's sake. The killer removed the glove from the left hand and reached into another pocket to retrieve a small flashlight. The bulb lit and the spray of light illuminated the killer's face. The nearly deceased target looked up through death to see his killer. If he had more strength left, he would have raged and roared. But he could only move his mouth to form a scream that would not come, would never come. He recognized his killer instantly. He had seen the face before, but never like this. Never this calm, this confident, this peaceful. A moment later, his eyes lost their weak focus as death consumed him.

The killer pulled a rag from a back pocket and wiped the blade, then moved the beam of light to survey the area around the kill. The footprints around the body were all made by the same size and make of boots. The killer had secured a pair exactly the same as those the deceased wore. The flashlight was extinguished. The killer turned for the open door where the silent night and shimmering snow waited.

Chapter 1

Wednesday, April 9, 1991 — Hamburg, Germany

It was an ant.

In the midst of controlled chaos chasing a terrorist bomb maker named Amir Shafiq through the streets of Hamburg, Lance Priest adjusted his footfall to avoid the ant. A single solitary little black one. It was nothing, literally nothing. But it was also something.

In 24 years, he'd stepped on thousands, maybe millions of ants, spiders, roaches, beetles. All variety of frantically scurrying insects had died beneath his feet. He could not recall a single instance in which he avoided stepping on one of these seemingly endless vermin. Killing them was nothing. So why had he just adjusted the descent of his right foot to steer clear of this particular fella? Why?

He knew the answer, but he didn't want to think about it, or her. Yes, it was her.

He'd been changed. No matter how minuscule the transformation, he was different. He'd found compassion, if only a modicum. A microscopic sliver of empathy could now be found alongside his general disdain. And he didn't really like it.

It felt unnatural to care. He smiled to himself and shook his head.

So here, with Shafiq only 25 feet ahead of him barreling through narrow and ancient city streets and a Bruce Springsteen song pounding in his head, Lance noticed an ant. Great. What next, call out to the terrorist and ask him to hold up so he could rescue a kitten from a tree? Should he ask the Pakistani bomb maker to stop traffic and help an elderly woman cross the street? Of course, this was just a phase, right? These new thoughts with their soft, beveled edge of empathy and compassion were a temporary state, right?

No time to think about it now. Shafiq swept to the left around a corner and disappeared for a second. The terrorist knocked a lady to the ground as he rounded the turn onto an even tighter ancient street with bricks and stones beneath their feet laid centuries ago. Lance was around the same corner a moment later. He hurdled the woman sprawled out on the street. Helping her up was out of the question right now.

“Es tut mir leid,” he called back to her, apologizing in German. He examined his bodily output and reserves. His lungs were fine, heart rate up but not much, legs fine, not taxed at all. No pain at all in his leg or hip where the bullets fired by Saddam Hussein's personal security guards had ripped through back in Baghdad nearly three months ago. This little impromptu chase was three minutes and 14 seconds old. He knew this because of the permanent clock in his head tuned by years of running. Lance could go like this for another half-hour. He was pretty sure the terrorist didn't have that in him. But he was not underestimating the man. The guy had kept up an impressive pace so far. Springsteen sang and the E Street Band played in his head.

The foot chase started just over three-quarters of a mile to the southeast. Two fellow terrorists from the Hamburg cell were being arrested by police on the street outside a coffee shop

when Shafiq rounded a corner four minutes earlier. He was late for their meeting. Lucky dude.

It probably would have been just fine for the Pakistani if he hadn't stopped in his tracks and wheeled around in the opposite direction from the arrest scene. His abrupt movement caught the attention of a certain young CIA operative standing 150 yards to the east. Lance was leaning against a wall taking in the thorough arrest procedure from a safe distance. He had been involved in monitoring the terrorist cell for two weeks with his Hamburg counterparts. The cell had come close to achieving their goal of blowing up the Hamburg Hauptbahnhof, the city's central train station. Lance loved that German word – bahnhof. It sounded much cooler than the English "train station."

It was a four-man cell. The leader and his right-hand man were being arrested without incident. A third was currently being detained at a library three blocks over. The German authorities were expecting Shafiq to be in the coffee shop with the other two. Intel had fallen short yet again. Someone should have had eyes on him every moment this morning.

When Shafiq did his little sidewalk pirouette, he caught Lance's eye. He immediately recognized the bomb maker and started walking casually in Shafiq's direction until the Pakistani turned the corner, at which point Lance took off after him. As Lance expected, Shafiq was in full sprint and already a block ahead as he rounded the corner. The chase was on. Cue the music. It had always been like this. When Lance starts running, whether out for an early morning jog or rounding the corners of the track back in high school, his personal jukebox kicks in. He never knew what song was going to play.

Now, nearly four minutes later, Lance was within five paces of Shafiq. If it had been just a short sprint, the lean Pakistani might have made it. He was obviously in excellent shape and seemed to know the Hamburg urban terrain well. But a chase of any distance gave Lance an advantage over most humans. He

excelled at chasing down other runners from behind and crushing their spirits in the last 100 yards or so of a race. He'd done it dozens of times back in junior and high school in Oklahoma. He had sometimes let it string out until the very last few strides before he leaned to take the finish line first. It was nothing personal.

Shafiq slowed for a few paces and then suddenly burst to the right. Lance was within feet of him as he pivoted off his left foot to make the turn onto another street. This avenue was wider, less ancient than the previous street. Several cars were traveling at medium speed. The Pakistani veered left into traffic. A driver slammed on brakes and the car fishtailed into a parked van with a loud crash. Two pedestrians screamed and dove for cover. That did it. This was getting a little ridiculous.

Lance had been watching Shafiq and his motions, his fluid movement, to see if there was a pattern beneath his actions. He was hoping the terrorist was leading him closer to a safe house or perhaps a location the cell had determined to meet at in the case of discovery. But this was not to be. Lance could see that his target's actions were not thought out, there was no predetermination. He was merely fleeing.

As he had in the first minute of the chase, Lance went out of body, up to 2,000 feet to observe the scene below. His natural ability to elevate from his current earthly location to look down on the world around him allowed him to see this small neighborhood of Hamburg. He could see streets and alleyways stretching out in all directions like arteries emanating from an urban heart. This particular view of Hamburg, Germany at longitude 53 33 N and latitude 9 59 E came to him via satellite imagery he had reviewed in the days before coming to this northern German city.

Lance never thought much about having a photographic memory. He didn't really agree with others who said he did. For him, the images he sees on maps and photos come alive. Streets,

highways, alleys, parking lots, all have features, characteristics he is able to see in 3-D so that when he is actually in a location he has seen on a map, he can 'see' in all directions. The yellow, red and blue lines on maps come alive to show him which direction to take, which shortcut to trust. Satellite images brought this innate ability to new levels of clarity after he joined the CIA three years ago.

He'll never forget the first time he was escorted into a secure room where satellite imagery was beamed for use by CIA intel operators. The feeling was nothing short of orgasmic. He actually blushed a little. For a kid who devoured maps, with their stagnant images that may have been printed years or decades earlier, seeing satellite images that encompassed entire cities and allowed visual drill-down to individual streets with addresses, license plates, even leaves on trees, was awesome. He said just that - "awesome" standing there in that high tech room with television monitors filled with images captured by satellites just minutes earlier. It was truly kid in a candy store stuff.

Lance looked down briefly from above as Shafiq completed his illegal crossing of the street in front of moving vehicles. In his mind's eye, he could see the intersection up ahead and the heavier traffic crowding the busy thoroughfare. And on the northeast corner of that intersection was a school. Lance couldn't allow children to be placed in danger. Decision made.

It was always in moments like this, with pressure and action and violence expected in the moments ahead, that Lance changed. It was not a conscious act. But he became someone else. He became Preacher, an alter ego given the name by other boys making fun of his last name -- Priest. Since a boy first uttered the name almost 15 years ago, Preacher had simply become part of him. One thing Lance knew that others did not, Preacher is not nice.

Preacher put on a sudden burst of speed on the opposite side of the street from Shafiq. In four seconds, he was even with him and then ahead. The terrorist looked to his right and saw his pursuer across the street and did just what Preacher had hoped. The Pakistani suddenly turned left at the last alley before the busy intersection.

Preacher leapt into traffic to follow the terrorist. A van grazed him and he bounced off into an oncoming Peugeot. He slid across the hood as the car squealed to a stop. He was back on his feet in a flash and increased his pace, tearing down the tight alley at full sprint. Shafiq looked back over his shoulder, which cost him a fraction of his own pace. By the time the terrorist turned his head forward, Preacher was upon him. Game over.

In the next second, Preacher reached out and gave the bomb maker's right shoulder a shove with his left hand. The move knocked Shafiq off balance. The bomber stumbled and then tumbled. Preacher shoved him down to the ground while running past. Shafiq rolled several times on the bricks. Preacher was stopped and waiting for him as Shafiq rolled back onto his feet. They were only a step apart.

The next few seconds would tell Preacher all he needed to know about his opponent. If Shafiq reached for a weapon, Preacher would explode at him and see where the cards and body parts landed. But for the moment he watched and waited. He made it a point to never underestimate his competition. It started back in junior high at a track meet in Bixby, Oklahoma just south of Tulsa. That day, Lance's coach had him run in the 100 and 200-yard dashes, not his strongest races. He lined up next to a somewhat chubby redheaded dude who looked like he couldn't do 50, let alone the 100. Young Lance knew he had the chubster beat and started evaluating the other racers. So he was more than a little surprised when chubby proceeded to blow

away everyone else in the race. It wasn't even close at the finish line.

He learned two valuable life lessons in those 12 seconds. First, big boys with big bellies can have big muscles underneath. Second, the book under the cover can definitely be something other than what you expect. Since then, he could count on one hand the times he had underestimated someone. He regretted each.

Two seconds passed as he and Shafiq surveyed each other. Lance was watching the Pakistani's ability to take in details. It was in his eyes. And they didn't leave his. No H2T – head to toe optical vertical sweep; no recognizable cognition of the strengths and weakness of his opponent; no shift to a defensive stance. Lance would need to make the first move.

He did so in Arabic, which surprised the hell out of Shafiq, since Lance's hair was bleached blonde and blue contacts covered his hazel eyes. He was the picture of the Teutonic man, Nordic and white. "My brother, why do you run from me?"

Shafiq, taken back, responded in fluent Arabic, not his native Punjabi. "Why do you chase me?" He heaved and drew in a huge breath.

"Because you ran my brother." Lance smiled.

"I am not your brother." Shafiq did not smile.

"We are all brothers in Allah's eyes. All believers, that is." Lance's smile widened and his wait was over.

Shafiq shifted weight to his right foot and threw a right punch. It was telegraphed by the shift of body weight, clenching of fingers on the right hand and slight gyration of Shafiq's right shoulder. Lance saw the parts of the Pakistani's anatomy at work and recognized the action before the human delivering the punch knew it himself. He knew what was happening under the terrorist's clothing, below his skin. He knew the nerve impulses sent from brain to the gastrocnemius, the major calf muscle, would cause it to contract which flexed toes and brought the

man up onto the ball of his right foot. Lance knew the man stood just a hair under 5 feet, 11 inches which allowed him to reach a total of 7 feet, 9 inches when fully extended from toe to outstretched finger. Knowing this allowed Lance to lean back slightly and watch the entire series of motions from 8 feet away.

Preacher moved his head to the left and deflected the blow to the side with an extended open left palm. Shafiq pulled back and launched a left rising punch toward Preacher's throat. Preacher shifted his weight to the right and the shot grazed his shoulder. With the move, Preacher knew what he needed to know about Shafiq's training. He knew the bomb maker had been to training camps in Libya. He knew what type of martial arts training he had been provided. The two opening moves and the recovery stance following the initial punch were karate. His choice of the moves let Preacher know the next two or three moves based upon Shafiq's "kata" or model of moves.

Indeed, Shafiq's offensive barrage included a combination of moves Preacher had seen a number of times. They were delivered with speed and strength, but not nearly as fast or as strong as those delivered by Master Jun at Harvey Point, the CIA training facility Preacher had called home for most of three years. Preacher had initially been beaten and bruised by the brutality of his Master's training, but eventually improved to inflict substantial pain on the martial arts master. Shafiq was good, but he was simply no match for Preacher, who along with karate, had mastered seven other forms of martial art under intensive, painful, inhuman training. He had speed, strength and knowledge on his side. But he still maintained respect for the element of surprise.

Their battle kept them in close contact in the narrow alley. Shafiq attempted multiple punches and added elbow blows along the way. A couple of them made contact with Preacher's arms and one smacked his cheek pretty good. It stung and served to put resolve in Preacher's intentions. In response to

Shafiq's sixth thrust, a double-punch and left kick, Preacher countered with a duck, contraction of his own right gastrocnemius muscle which put pressure on the ball of his right foot for leverage followed by a vicious right-handed open-palm blow to the Pakistani's mid section. Had Shafiq's stomach and other organs below his diaphragm not been in the way, the blow may well have broken the terrorist's spine. Shafiq gasped, groaned and collapsed to one knee. Lance could have finished it, but wanted to see how his opponent responded to such a nasty blow. After two seconds, Shafiq rose and faced Lance. His eyes showed determination as he struggled to bring oxygen into his lungs. He then dipped to attempt a sweeping right leg kick. It was an offensive move born of desperation.

Now, the natural reaction to this move is to step back, jump or bend your knee sideways to absorb the blow. Instead, Preacher pivoted in the direction of the coming kick and dipped down to bring his right knee into the path of Shafiq's swinging shin. The crack was audible. The Pakistani's tibia was broken as moving force met immovable object.

The fight was over. Shafiq fell to the ground and brought his leg up and wrapped his hands around his shattered right leg bone. He moaned for a moment before biting his lip. He might have gotten up and soldiered on, but that was a hopeless endeavor. He would have just been punished more. Instead he looked up at Preacher.

"So you caught me, what now?" He blurted the words through his pain.

Lance looked at him for a few moments. He took in the whole picture from head to toe. What he saw did not surprise him by any means. His brief review of Shafiq's file, along with the other individuals in this Hamburg cell, gave him the basics he needed to know about the Pakistani. He could see those attributes now. Attractive, well educated, well groomed, from a high socio-economic status family. Not a foot soldier of the

jihad. Most of all, Lance could see intelligence. This guy was smart, deadly smart. The bombs he had produced were smart as well. They had killed hundreds.

Another thing shot through Lance's head as he looked down as his captive terrorist. He wondered for the briefest moment what she would do now. How would she gather information? How long would she let this cold-blooded killer continue to breathe before she put a bullet between his eyes? Or, would she torture him, make him suffer and even beg for death? That sounded more like her.

Those thoughts were fleeting, but they were there. And they pissed Lance off. He shouldn't be thinking about her. Shouldn't care how she would handle this situation. But damn, here he was doing it again. He'd need to get control of this, quick-like.

He smiled and spoke again in Arabic. "Now we pray."

"What?"

"It is time, almost noon. Time for dhuhr." Lance held up his wrist and tapped the watch. It was nearly time for the mid-day prayer. "Will you pray with me brother to remember Allah and seek guidance?"

Shafiq looked at his own watch with his hands still hugging his broken leg. "Don't you need to radio other police and let them know you have me?"

"There's time for that. I know the pillars of law enforcement just as I do the pillars of our faith. And right now, we are called to prayer. Will you join me?" With that, Lance stepped back and reached into a holster underneath his jacket to pull out his standard Hamburg police handgun. He held up the gun to show he did not have a finger on the trigger. Shafiq looked at the gun and shook his head, obviously wondering why this crazy German policeman hadn't pulled the gun before and just shot him. Lance knelt and adjusted his orientation to face southeast toward the Kaaba in Mecca. He then placed the gun on the ground beside him. He looked over his shoulder to the man on

the ground, "I'm sorry we don't have water for cleansing or rugs to kneel upon, but we must make do."

Lance waited with his hands on his knees a few feet from Shafiq who was definitely surprised by this turn of events. Slowly, the Pakistani rolled over from his rear end to get on his knees. The movement was clearly painful with his broken leg and all. He also couldn't believe this policeman had turned his back on him. The two men prayed in silence, mouthing the words of the salat, or prayer. Both bowing heads and falling to the ground in supplication to Allah. If the Pakistani thought about attacking, he never acted upon it.

When finished, Lance stayed on his knees but turned to Shafiq to talk at his level. "Thank you for joining me brother. No matter our differences, we must follow the laws of God. Peace be with you."

"I agree. Peace be with you," Shafiq adjusted his weight to his left to take pressure off his right leg. "What do we do now?"

"Can I ask what guidance you prayed for just now?" Lance smiled again.

"Certainly. I prayed for strength for what I will surely face. I prayed that Allah would give me the strength to remain at peace during the coming days. I thanked him for choosing me to fight for his righteousness. For blessing me with truth and wisdom."

"Very good. Do you want to know what I prayed for?"

"Yes, please share with me." Lance's peaceful demeanor had calmed Shafiq.

"I also prayed for strength. I asked for the strength not to kill you now." Lance kept the smile on his face. He was gentle, subdued. His body implied no threat.

"Kill me?" Shafiq was perplexed. "You plan to arrest me and take me in for questioning don't you?"

Lance did not reply, only smiled. A few moments later he answered, "Do you want to know what guidance I prayed for this morning before dawn?"

Shafiq didn't answer this time. He only stared.

"I'll tell you. I prayed for the strength and wisdom to find you and your friends. I prayed for his help to stop you from betraying everything Islam stands for with your murderous actions, your bombs that kill indiscriminately." Lance smiled wider, but his smile was not really for Shafiq.

He would have burst out laughing if it wouldn't have spoiled the moment. He was so totally full of shit. He had basically become a Muslim over the past year leading up to and after the brief Gulf War. But his prayers were anything but pleas for help from Allah. He didn't ask for help this morning or a few minutes ago. Instead, he uses the five-times-a-day prayer to remember song lyrics. Just a minute ago, he tried like hell to recall the second refrain of another Springsteen song he hadn't heard in forever. He couldn't remember the verse and it was killing him. Shafiq didn't need to know this little tidbit. Something like that might make Lance sound crazy. Anyway, Lance was on a roll with the whopper he was telling.

"I don't know what you are talking about. I am not a murderer." Shafiq gave himself away too easily. He was going to plead innocent and profess guilt only by association. Lance was a little disappointed. It was not a good lie, no effort behind it. But he assumed it was part of their terrorist training. Funny how they were so committed to their goal of killing and maiming Western and Jewish infidels, but not man enough to stand up and admit their crimes. They hid behind terror and claimed God was on their side when they killed the innocent. Many even believed what they were saying. A perfect lie.

"Of course not. You don't know anything about assembling bombs or placing them in locations where they can kill innocent people. Or about detonating them remotely from a safe distance but still close enough to admire your work. None of that, correct?" Lance said this last part in English and it did exactly what he'd hoped it would. It shook Shafiq.

Shafiq could only look at Lance. He had no answer.

Lance switched to German. “You wouldn’t know anything about growing up on manicured streets in Lahore while others suffered in poverty. You wouldn’t know what it’s like to get a new bike on your birthday and ride up and down streets lined with pretty houses while others endure poverty-stricken lives, dreaming about one day living a life of privilege and excess. You wouldn’t know what it’s like to be able to afford a Western education in England and have sex with British girlfriends and enjoy the freedoms of an open society while slowly being sucked into a lie that festers among the supposed righteous. You wouldn’t know about that would you, Amir.”

Lance had made it all up on the spot, like normal. Shafiq was dumbfounded. He had started this day like he had every other in Hamburg. Sure of the fact that he was doing Allah’s work. Certain that he was a vital part of the jihad against the evils of the West. But he was also secure in his anonymity. Lance had just blown that away. The gig was up.

“I see you processing,” Lance was back to Arabic. “You are wondering what is happening? Who am I?” Lance closed his eyes. He was cracking up inside, but he did have a job to do. Seibel, his CIA mentor, sent him here to work with the Hamburg police and local CIA operatives to gather whatever information he could about this cell and its connections to al Qaeda, the silent spreading menace. The fact that he had lucked into spotting, chasing and catching the chief bomb maker for the most wanted Hamburg cell was pure chance. But life just worked that way for Lance. He opened his eyes. The smile was gone. “God has spoken to me.”

The next seconds were a blur. Preacher was on his feet and then on top of Shafiq. He shoved the terrorist on his stomach and pressed the man's face to the bricks that paved the alley. He reached back to grab Shafiq’s right foot below the fractured tibia. He wrenched and twisted the foot. The pain must be

excruciating and Shafiq should be screaming. But Preacher dug his knee into the bomb maker's back, which forced out all breath, not allowing him to shriek in pain. After wrenching the foot a second time, Preacher released it and spoke quietly into the weeping man's ear. He chose English for this part.

"Yes Amir, God speaks to the chosen. I am one. It was not by chance that I followed you today. I have been with you for weeks. Watching you and your friends as you blaspheme Islam and Allah with your bombs and terror and murder. I have been told that you are to speak with me now, man-to-man, brother-to-brother. You are to tell me everything. You do not have a choice in the matter, brother. And then, after you tell me your secrets and betray your confidants, I will give you my gun so you can put it in your mouth and end the pain this life has brought you. I'll help you pull the trigger. I understand Amir, it will be difficult for you.

"You will not go to paradise and your virgins like you were hoping, but you will be doing God's will, for he has spoken to me. I am your fire, your flame. I am your welcome mat to hell and oblivion." Because Shafiq was face down on the bricks he couldn't see Preacher's face. If he could, he would see that it was blank. This was nothing. Shafiq was nothing. Preacher saw him as less than the ant he had avoided killing minutes earlier. He wasn't going to kill this terrorist today. He was much more valuable than a single alleyway confession.

It didn't take much more. Shafiq was broken. Turned out, he was not as committed to his cause as Preacher was to his. And Preacher was convincing, always is. Lying there on top of a Pakistani bomb maker on centuries old bricks just blocks from the Elbe River in Hamburg, Germany, Lance Priest was nothing less than the hand and voice of a vindictive god. He was the gifted liar, the lethal, ruthless weapon his government needed to fight a new enemy that had declared war on the United States.

Chapter 2

“Drop your pants.”

Marta Illena Sidorova’s words were a command. The gun in her hand backed up the words. Lance did as he was told.

He undid his belt and let the pants fall to his boots right there on the freezing front porch of a beautiful and secluded mountain villa with snow on the ground, in the trees and in the air. He also hooked his thumb in the waist of his underwear to pull them down a couple of inches and lifted up his shirt to expose his hip.

It was only the second time he had seen her. He didn’t take his eyes from hers. She moved hers from his to look at his right leg and hip. The two new scars were there. Still red and inflamed but significantly healed since the bullets had struck him three weeks and two days ago in Baghdad. She held the gun in her right hand because her more dominant left hand was still wrapped. Healing from the bullet Lance had sent through it three weeks and two days ago. If she were to lower her pants, the bullet wound on her right thigh would also be red and inflamed, but healing nicely after field surgery was performed in the apartment overlooking death and destruction below in Baghdad. Lance had also fired that bullet.

She looked up from his wounds to meet his eyes. “So it is true. You did not come out of your mission unscathed.” Her voice was calm, subdued. Lance had expected her to be angry. He expected the gun as well.

“Others weren’t as lucky. Some didn’t make it home. Two bullets are nothing.” His words were honest, but they also carried a code. He should have killed her that day, but didn’t. Or, more accurately, he couldn’t.

“There are casualties in most missions. We all must die sometime, right?” Her English was perfect. No Russian accent. “It probably should have been my time, I think.”

Lance raised the waistband of his underwear and let the shirt fall and bent to pull his pants up. He didn’t know what to expect when he knocked on the door. A few minutes earlier, he made a point of making as much noise as possible when he parked the car at the end of the driveway a couple hundred yards away. He had revved the engine several times before he slammed the door, twice. The noise easily carried across the field of snow. His chosen path to the front porch of the villa was out in the open where he could clearly be seen from the wall of windows on the west side of the structure.

He found the place easy enough. Seibel’s coordinates were spot on. It was indeed a hidden slice of paradise up several dirt and gravel roads that no casual traveler would trek. It was a secret alpine lair for a secretive person. There were surely alarms that he had triggered. She would have installed these protective devices well before taking up residence.

“Would you like to come in?” She lowered the gun and stepped to the side. Her step back carried with it the tiniest hint of a limp in her right leg. Lance winced slightly, witnessing her pain. A reaction he should not be feeling. Damn.

“Yes. Thank you,” Lance nodded like a gentleman before stepping into the foyer. He took his eyes from hers, but not without some difficulty. She was mesmerizing in a way. After

removing his snow-covered boots, he stepped past her, turning his back to her. He couldn't know what she would do in this moment. She could raise the gun and put a clean shot through his skull. She could jam the barrel of her Graz Buria into his back and order him to the floor. He was ready for anything. But didn't plan to fight back.

Instead, she simply closed the door behind him, turning her back on him. A wary opponent would have surveyed the yard and forest for signs of others who had come with Lance. She didn't look. She didn't seem concerned about those things. Marta walked past him into a small living room with couches and side chairs and a small fire crackling in the fireplace. She set her gun down on the coffee table and sat on a couch, motioning for him to sit in the sofa facing her. He did so. They simply looked at each other. There was no rush. There were no deadlines, no nuclear weapons to be captured, and no head of state to assassinate. Lance was content to let her lead the conversation. He really hadn't thought much further than seeing her again. And whether she would kill him, of course.

"I guess I should be surprised to see you." She broke the silence.

"He didn't tell you I might stop by for a visit?"

"No. I haven't spoken with him since Baghdad. Not since he left after his doctor stitched me up." She was obviously a little more comfortable. Her English words carried a breath of Russian accent. "We only talk a few times a year anyway."

"But you're not surprised to see me."

"No. I didn't really expect you to come. But I knew we would meet again." The smile that accompanied these words was delightful. Lance could tell by the set of her face that smiling was not something she did often, or even naturally. "Our meeting in Iraq was..." she looked away for the first time. His eyes followed hers to the windows and the forest and mountains beyond them. "Strange, I think that is the word."

“Strange works.” He agreed with her and smiled.

“Can I ask why you came here? Why didn’t you pick a more public place?” Her question implied that coming here was not the smartest thing he’d done. A public place might offer more security, less chance that she would kill him on the spot. He had shot her, after all.

“I don’t know really. I have to get back to the U.S. soon. I guess I just needed to. Sorry, that’s not much of an answer.” He noticed something else happening. He was telling her the truth. Like Marta’s smile, it was not something he did often. Honesty didn’t come naturally to him.

“That’s fine. I think I understand.” Her smile was back. Lance shook his head ever so slightly. She noticed, of course. “What is it?” Her smile even wider.

“You should be mad, pissed. I’d understand if you’d shot me a few minutes ago. I’d be fine if you killed me. But instead you’re sitting there smiling at me.”

So they just looked at each other for the next few moments. Each smiling. It was surprisingly easy for both. She broke the silence again. “I can’t help myself.” Now it was her turn to shake her head. She turned again to look out the window, but not before the faintest blush lit her face.

Chapter 3

“Go back. Go back to the last one.” She was giggling and speaking Russian, her natural language. Her dialect from Novosibirsk in Siberia.

They were sitting outside on the rear balcony overlooking a snow-covered meadow with snow-covered pines in the near distance and unspeakably gorgeous snow-covered mountain peaks filling up the rest of their view. Their cups of coffee steamed into the frigid air. It was the morning of their second day together. As a gentleman, Lance initially declined and then graciously accepted her invitation to stay, sleeping in the small but charming guest bedroom, of course.

He was putting on a show for her. In the last 11 minutes, he had been no fewer than 60 different characters. The little act started when she asked him to tell her something honestly. He proceeded to tell her honest truth after honest truth, but did so in the guise of different characters. His flawless transition from Bavarian nun to Mexican gardener to California surfer to Saudi carpet salesman was nothing less than flabbergasting. Marta had never seen anything or anyone like it. Lance couldn't help but think of watching Robin Williams on Carson or Letterman running through a dozen or so characters in his frenetic manner.

Lance was a one-man show. The coffee cup in his hands, or placed on the table in front of them, was his only prop. And he had a bunch more characters he could pull out, but Marta finally asked him to stop and go back to the used car salesman from Texas he had just done before switching to an old man in a Jewish deli.

He affected the thick Texas accent again and adjusted an invisible cowboy hat as he greeted her. “Ma’am, I believe I have just the automobile for you. It’s a low mileage Pontiac and I do declare, you would look like a million dollars behind the wheel.”

Her giggle evolved into full laughter as he tilted his head and put the cheesiest smile ever on his face. It was toothy and anything but sincere. “Ma’am, I’m quite serious when I say, you and this car were made for each other. What do you say, can I put you in this beauty today?”

“That’s it. That’s the one. What’s your name?” She was playful and reached out a hand to touch his forearm. He wished he didn’t have the heavy jacket on so her touch would have been on his skin.

“I’m Bart. Bart Radish, but my friends call me Horse.” He kept the cheesy smile going.

“Horse? Why do they call you that?”

“On account of my last name, ma’am.”

She squinched up her forehead for a moment. “Oh, I get it. Your last name is Radish.” And she laughed some more. It was infectious and, lovely, that was the word that came to his mind. She was lovely.

“You got it little lady.” He tipped his pretend cowboy hat again.

Marta sat back in her chair and shook her head. She brought her coffee cup to her lips. After looking into the distance for a few quiet moments, she turned back to him and spoke in English. “You are truly something. He did not lie when he told

me about you and your various talents.” After shaking her head again she smiled a new smile; one he hadn’t seen before. “I’ve never met anyone like you. That’s your answer.”

He furrowed his brow, “My answer?”

“To your question. You were wondering what he told me about you. He said I’ve never met anyone like you. He said there was only one person he knew that came close.” She looked away. Her breath steamed out and floated away on the silent breeze.

He followed her gaze into the beauty of the winter forest scenery in front of them. “And I think we know who he was talking about.”

“Do we?”

“Not too hard to guess. I think it’s safe to say that you are that one person.”

“You think so?” She brought her eyebrows together.

But the strangest thing happened. Lance did not see her procerus muscle at work. He did not watch his favorite muscle tug at the fascia lying underneath her eyebrows pulling them together and creating a delicate crease in the skin between her eyes. He did not look at the orbicular oculi, the muscles surrounding her eyes creating the squint, or the minute tightening in her sternocleidomastoid, the smooth muscles running from the base of the skull down to the top of the sternum on both sides of the neck.

He did not see Marta as he saw others. She was not a compilation of anatomical parts working in unison to create a functioning human. No, he saw something else when he looked at Marta. Lance saw a person. It was a realization that took a whole second to sink in. Damn, double damn. This was bad.

It was his turn to smile and shake his head. “So the question I have is, do you think he was looking for you in all those candidates over the years? Looking for something he’d only found in his most prized pupil?”

She reached out a hand to him. He took it instinctively without hesitation. Although both cold, there was heat when they touched. She smiled again. It was the new smile. Lance liked it. It warmed him further.

“I don’t know.” Her response was honest. “Geoffrey does things for reasons only he knows. He doesn’t share his motives with others, at least not me.”

He hadn’t held someone’s hand since holding his mother’s back in grade school. He couldn’t recall holding a girl’s, or woman’s hand, ever. It was a show of affection he was unfamiliar with.

Holding her hand like this brought feelings of comfort and trust, feelings he had purposely kept separate from his relationships with females. Holding Marta’s hand on this winter morning was perhaps the most intimate moment he had ever shared. It surprised him. Yet as he started to wander, to travel somewhere else, or maybe go out of body and look down at this intimate scene, she squeezed his hand. She kept him there in the moment.

“Can I say something?” He was hesitant, unsure.

“Of course. Anything.” No hesitation in her response.

“I don’t know how to do this.”

She just looked at him. “What part?”

“Being here; being with you.”

She squeezed his hand again. “You’re doing fine. You don’t need to do anything else.”

“I don’t know. That seems too easy.”

“Don’t make it hard.” Her smile lovely again.

Even with her honesty and her transparency, he just couldn’t help it. His natural tendencies were too strong for him to control and he dove back into the comfort of a created character. “Well ma’am, I’ll do my darndest not to.” And he tipped his imaginary hat one last time. He’d have to work on actually being Lance. It was a character, a person, he did not know well.

They sat together holding hands for a while longer, neither wanting to let go. He stayed with her for two more days. He was genuinely surprised by her ability to find comfort in his presence; even more impressed by her domestic talents, especially cooking. He never imagined this cold, calculating and supremely talented killer could prepare such fantastic meals. She absolutely loved to bake. She found real pleasure in making and baking bread, cakes and apple pie. He ate it all.

They took walks through the snow. They played chess beside the fire. They tried to one-up each other in target practice using her silenced Glock handgun. He never stood a chance and could only sigh when she put three successive bullets through the exact center of the hand-painted target. She was definitely scary. Definitely deadly.

On the morning he was to leave, Lance didn't want to. He'd never felt this before. They had held hands a few more times, but not advanced in their display of affection. The attraction between them was obvious. It was powerful, like its own gravity. But the time was not right. Each knew it. To explore deeper feelings and sensations at this early juncture would complicate matters beyond their already convoluted status. She walked with him to his car. He had moved it to a detached garage to hide from prying eyes in the sky. Lance pulled open the heavy garage doors and turned to her. A brisk breeze was blowing, but it was not enough to cause the tears that had formed in her gentle eyes. Sadness produced these tears.

Neither knew when they would see the other again. He was returning to Harvey Point, his CIA home away from home. She would be leaving her hidden villa within days to resume her role as a KGB operative gone rogue. Their paths might not cross for months, possibly longer. Neither liked the thought of that. But neither was naïve enough to believe they could make plans. They did not exchange numbers or addresses or quaint code words only they would recognize. Their lives, their time, were

not their own. They moved at opposite ends of a dangerous world. Where or when their orbits would bring them together again was up to the stars.

He took the necessary step to her. It put his face inches from hers, closer than they'd been since their strange, but passionate kiss and embrace in Baghdad. She was the first to throw her arms around him. He responded by doing the same. Finally, he pulled his head back to look into her face. A tear escaped her eye and gently rolled down her cheek. He wiped it away and then he followed the curve of her cheek down to her chin with his finger. She brought her lips up to meet his and their embrace took on an entirely new element. Unlike Baghdad, Marta had not been shot a few minutes earlier and Lance had not thought of killing her in the preceding moments.

No, this time, this embrace and kiss were born of a new passion. This attraction, this thing, was real. Undeniable. She pulled away and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you for coming to see me." She sighed.

He surprised himself by laughing at the simplicity of her words and the underlying sentiment. "Thank you for letting me stay with you." She pulled away from him and took a deep breath and a step back. He realized in that moment that she was indeed stronger than him. He did not have the strength to pull away, to be separated.

"Good bye Lance." She smiled and another tear rolled down.

Lance reached up to tip his invisible cowboy hat. "So long ma'am. I truly appreciate the hospitality. I'll be seeing ya." He stepped into the garage and was about to open the door when he turned back to her. Bart was gone, it was just Lance now. "I'll be seeing you. Count on it." He got into the car and started it. He backed the sedan out and pulled away. Marta waved and smiled.

Chapter 4

She turned away before he could see her cry in his rear view mirror.

Tears hadn't flowed from her eyes like this in years. She hadn't convulsed and bent over in emotional pain for just as long. This is the reason she hadn't given herself to anyone, to any man. This loss of control, no matter how brief, was an affront to her being. Marta despised those unable to stay in control of their emotions. She honestly never expected to be one of them. These feelings were entirely outside her expectations. But they would pass.

As she walked back to the house, she stopped and listened to the sound of the car's engine fading away. When it was gone, there was nothing but silence. Her footfall in the snow, with its gentle crunch underneath, was the only sound. By the time she reached the porch, she was herself again. She was ruthless, determined, uncompromising. She was Marta. One to be respected – to be feared.

The tears were distant memories. In 20 seconds, she had shoved those sensations down deep inside. She purposely looked away from his face in her mind as she entered the door

and walked through empty rooms. She closed her ears to his laugh and the amazing variety of languages, dialects and characters he displayed for her. She closed her fist to avoid the feeling, the sensation of him reaching across the chessboard to take her hand as they sat on their knees beside the coffee table.

She had realized in that moment that she was ready, prepared to let him take her. But he did not advance. He didn't cross the chasm between them. He had obviously had his share of women. He was beautiful, so easy to look upon and be with. He would know what to do, where to touch, how to read her thoughts as she lay in his arms. She shook her head and brought a clenched fist to her forehead to push the images out. She needed a clear mind for what she had to do.

Instead of the past three days of comfort and pleasure, she thought of the next dozen steps that lay ahead when she departed today. She left numerous issues hanging, ends untied. Her only trusted team members were dead, thanks to Lance. Stop that. Don't think, or say, his name.

The American CIA agent. That was better. Put a vague nameplate on him. He killed them in Iraq. She would have to rely on others she had been cultivating. She would need to invite them in from the periphery. They would welcome the invitation. Working with Marta, or whatever name she chose to work under, meant action. It meant results. And most of all, it meant money. Her operations had generated millions.

Four weeks of silence was not unheard of for Marta. She did not need regular contact or updates. Those she had left in charge of information drops or blackmail operations or money laundering knew that she would be back. They both looked forward to and feared that day. One never knew what to expect from the brilliant and deadly Russian.

Marta kept her confidants to a select few. She would be contacting these few in the coming days. First though, she needed to visit to her boss. Marta needed to see Gregor

Smelinski to show him she was still in control. Her well-cultivated role as a rogue agent, a KGB pariah, had been created in tandem with him. He considered Marta his greatest weapon. He said it with his eyes every time they met.

Funny how these lions of espionage, these two uncompromising leaders thought they knew her. Smelinski and Seibel were unquestionably brilliant. They were strategists with decades of experience on their side. They were the best in their chosen profession. The fact they both still lived and breathed was proof of their survival skills. But neither knew what drove “their Marta.” And she knew, absolutely knew, that neither one could see what was coming. Neither knew they were doomed the moment they met her. For as much as they had invested in her in time, resources and training, she had made a greater investment in creating a façade of acceptance. Both the Russian and the American thought they had control. Neither did. No one ever would.

Marta was so much more than their pawn. She would kill them both soon enough. It was just a matter of time and timing. She straightened her stance; stiffened her bearing. She suddenly had to shove down a thought, an image of Lance. Stop it. Don’t think the name again. Why had he invaded her thoughts? She didn’t like it and couldn’t accept it. For the next half a second she saw a fleeting image of herself pointing a gun at him and pulling the trigger. She shoved that one down quickly as well. It caused her pain.

Chapter 5

No one was waiting for him as he walked up the air bridge from the plane that brought him from London to JFK. That was a good thing.

He fell into line with the other international passengers arriving in America; many were tourists making their first visit to the land of plenty. They all pulled out their papers. Most were still blurry-eyed from sleeping on the uneventful 7-hour 30-minute flight. He was carrying a passport that identified him as a businessman from Kuwait City. They were good papers, not real, but good.

He was calm and collected, no nerves at all as he stepped up to the counter for his turn with the bored but vigilant female customs agent. She greeted him by looking into his eyes per protocol. He smiled slightly and handed over his documents. She spent 40 seconds reviewing the passport and Kuwaiti I.D. card. She typed several bits of data into the aged computer sitting beside her on the counter. After reading the data returned to her screen, she turned back to him.

“Mr. Rashidi.”

“Yes.”

“Your visit to the U.S., is it business or pleasure?”

“All business this time.” He continued to smile, but appeared appropriately tired.

“Where will you be conducting your business?”

“Here in New York and in Philadelphia.”

“And what is your home address?” She asked.

He recited the address on the passport and then gestured to the document in her hands. “The information on my passport is current.”

“When will you be returning to Kuwait?”

“I will be flying to Jordan at the end of the month and then home to Kuwait.”

“Do you have your return tickets with you?”

“Oh, no I will be purchasing them within a week or two when my plans are confirmed.”

“Very good,” she was just about done with him. “Your visa requires you to check in with the Kuwaiti embassy and provide them your contact information while in the country.”

He smiled, a tired and weary, but pleasant smile. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to contact them tomorrow. I have the number right here.” He held up his briefcase and patted it. The customs agent handed him his documents and he made his way to the baggage claim.

After grabbing his bag, he stepped outside into the New York night. Instead of turning left to get in the line for taxis, he turned right and walked down the sidewalk. A taxi bypassed the waiting line and pulled over to the curb 50 feet in front of the man. It was a breach of protocol, but the taxi did have its "out of service" light lit.

The man opened the door and tossed his luggage in the back seat and closed the door to open the front passenger door to get in. He and the driver did not speak or look at each other. There would be plenty of time to talk later. First, he needed to visit the blind cleric in a secret location. There was news to share from

the leaders. News that could only be carried by trusted couriers and shared in person with true believers.

He had been to New York two times before, but he couldn't keep from craning his neck and looking up at the buildings as the taxi rolled down the urban canyons of Manhattan. To think, he was in a remote village in the mountains of Afghanistan just three days ago. He looked, but they were too far away to get a good view of the World Trade Center towers down at the south end of the small island. He'd see them soon enough, he told himself.

The man stepped out of his unadorned sedan onto the late evening sidewalk in front of the apartment building he called home. He also called the building his own. Unlike the millions in Moscow trying to scrape by today, only to face a tougher fight tomorrow, he had figured out the game long before coming to the Russian capitol. Politics was the answer. That is where the power is.

Instead of walking to the front entrance where a guard waited to open the door for him, he stepped back into the street and crossed. On the other side, a street vendor stood beside his pushcart. The man, a king among men, walked up to the vendor. The stooped old man bowed as the great man approached.

"How are your potatoes today?" He asked as he reached and lifted one.

"I believe it is an excellent batch in today sir," the vendor stepped aside, holding his hat in his hands. "Please take your pick. Your wife will be pleased with any of these, I believe."

He chose three potatoes and handed them to the vendor who put them into a paper sack. "Excellent choice sir."

"How much?" He asked.

"No charge. Please consider them a gift." The vendor smiled and bowed his head further.

"No, no. I insist. Name your price."

The vendor looked up, the smile faded from his beaten, battered face. "Three potatoes, three thousand rubles." The vendor did not flinch, did not bow his head this time.

If the man, the king, was insulted by the outlandish price, he did not let it show. Inflation was crazy, but the equivalent of \$300 for three potatoes was certainly an insane amount. "Now, that is what I like to hear. Capitalism is here. In a capitalistic society the price is flexible, supply and demand. Excellent." And he stepped in close, his face inches from the vendor. The man's guards took several steps closer as well. He waved them off.

"But capitalism also allows for negotiation. So my counter offer to you, my good potato man, is this, five thousand rubles." The man pulled the bills from his pocket. It was a sum many citizens of the Soviet Union, now the Russian Federation, would not earn in six months. "Here take it. The world gives you nothing. You only get what you work for, or have the balls to take."

He handed the vendor the bills, took the sack of potatoes and turned to walk away. "These better be the best potatoes my wife has ever seen." He laughed.

The wealthy man walked across the street to the apartment building. His guards, who had escorted him across the street, stopped at the front door and turned back in the direction of the street vendor who had began packing up his cart. They proceeded to escort the vendor out of the neighborhood and out of this life.

Like many great men, Kirill Chertzny, had lots of others willing to do his dirty work. A street vendor willing to ask an excessive sum for three potatoes today, could be a business owner willing to withhold his monthly percentage next month if word of this incident spread. It didn't.

