

07

Cold wind blew sand across the parking lot of Ouarzazate International. Vinyl flags advertising tours to the Sahara flapped in the last slanting light of the sunset. Three steps past the taxi lane, Degrev stood in the open expanse of the asphalt with two cell-phones. The rented Nokia remained silent, he spoke into the Thuraya. Over the taxis unloading passengers, Degrev watched the interior of the terminal. In his slacks, black leather jacket, black and white striped shirt, black leather beret, he looked like an actor modelling Russian fashions.

“You got the message on our flight into Morocco?”

Encryption flattened the voice of Colonel Del Cielo: “The text message from Red Card.”

“Next time, we buy the tickets.”

“If we can get the funding.”

A van painted in the colors and name of a hotel veered out of the taxi lane --- Degrev stepped between the taxis as the van accelerated past him.

“And the other flight? When will you meet the other flight?”

“The plane came in. I changed into my best shirt. She and I -- repeat, she and I -- will try to get in there.”

“I’ve got the Red Card on screen. Text message. Wrote that he’s got a taxi waiting.”

Degrev laughed. “Yeah, in case we need another car.”

Through the terminal windows, Degrev saw a slender blonde striding through the travelers and luggage men. She wore an Italian-styled Syrian jacket, designer jeans, high-heeled boots. With flowing blonde hair, she looked the image of the European starlet, tall, sleek, and pale. The blonde paused in the

entry of the terminal and waved for him to come in -- Maya.

Tourists and baggage men passed her. A Moroccan took her arm, she shrugged off the hand, didn't even look at the stranger as she continued to the taxis. Degrev clicked off the Thuraya, joined her in the stream of Europeans and Moroccans.

Maya took his arm like a lover, led him through the doors. She spoke close to his ear: "They brought in motorcycles. Replacement dirt bikes for a cross-Africa motorcycle race. Moto-cross. Motorcycles, mechanics. I saw a French video crew go in. You want to bring in the band with the camera?"

"You and me. We walk out there, we look."

"No BetaCam? The Moroccans saw the French with the camera and microphones, they passed them straight through. No document checks, no searches."

"We show business cards. We're movie stars. I look the part, you look the part. Let's try it. Where do we go?"

"There" Maya led him past the ticket lines of the airlines to a security door manned by a guard and a cleaning man with a dust mop.

As the guard raised a hand to stop the foreigners, Degrev flipped out his business card in Russian, German, and English. He spoke with a deliberate Russian accent. "Ci - ne - ma. Mo - to - cross."

The guard waved them past to a hallway lined with employee lockers. An exit door took them to the asphalt and service vehicles. A group of technicians assembled a tripod and camera on the flatbed of a luggage wagon. Production personnel with briefcases and clipboards sat on another wagon, the personnel shouting in French to the camera technicians, the technicians arguing and gesturing to the camera equipment. Two uniformed airport guards with Kalashnikovs watched. They motioned for Degrev and

Maya to hurry. The driver set the luggage wagon in motion, Maya grabbed the hand of Degrev and ran with him to the last wagon. Engine roar overwhelmed all voices as a private jet passed on the runway. Degrev leaned to Maya, shouted:

“Crates. Wood crates. Motorcycles. Suzuki Motorcycles. And if I tell you to distract, make a distraction.”

“And the Egyptians?”

“Watch for who is with the crates. Could be Egyptians. Or whoever else. Whoever is with the crates.”

The noise faded into the distance, Degrev and Maya stepped from the flatbed trailer. Maya saw the video camera aimed at them, she jerked back, turning Degrev away as the video crew panned from the terminal, across the indigo-with-night eastern horizon, to the expanse of asphalt and planes, to the desert, the camera pan continuing to the scene of the parked transport jet unloading motorcycles.

Camera strobes flashed. European women in the fantastic costumes of Arabic harems posed with leather-clad riders. The models competed for the attention of photographers and another video crew. Improvised work lights from the hanger illuminated the scene of women, riders, camera crews, and field workers wheeling motorcycles.

A commentator with a microphone pointed from the brilliant yellow and blue of a new motorcycle to a mass of tangled, sand-colored junk on the concrete -- only the two wheels identified the trash as a motorcycle.

As the event continued under the glaring lights, workers wheeled motorcycles down the back-ramp of the transport aircraft, then up another ramp to the flatbed of a stake-side truck.

“We got to scope this before walking into it.” Degrev took Maya by the hand, veered across the

asphalt as if walking to the staff entrance, then zagged back to the shadowed side of the hanger.

Two parked pickup trucks blocked their path. Both trucks rode on oversized tires and the high springs of four-wheel-drives. Roll bars arched behind the cabs. Despite the off-road equipment, the trucks looked showroom new -- the lights reflecting from their waxed black finish, the tires velvet black, the black undercoating of the fender wheel-wells unmarked by sand or mud.

Both black trucks carried wooden crates marked Suzuki. As Degrev and Maya approached, workers pushed a crate into the back of the second pickup truck.

As if kissing Maya, Degrev put his face in her hair to whisper. "The crates. I only see four. We've got to look for crate number five --"

"The Egyptians are there"

Several steps past the trucks, their backs to Degrev and Maya, a group of men watched the antics of the camera crews and video personalities. Three of the men wore stylish European leather jackets and slacks. Two other men wore cheap polyester suits.

Maya listened to the group as they smoked cigarettes and laughed at the news crews photographing the models and racers.

"Three foreign Arabs," Maya told Degrev. "They sound Egyptian. The two other men, the quiet ones, I think they're Moroccans."

The men in the polyester suits held folding-stock Kalashnikov rifles.

"We can't let them see us" Degrev turned his back to the Arabs and raised his cellphone.

"You calling the band?"

"I'm not calling, I'm talking to you. Right now, you're the blonde in the leather jacket and tight pants." As if he spoke into the cellphone, Degrev questioned Maya. "Look past me. Are they looking at us?"

“No. They’re watching the other women.”

“I need a distraction but they’ll see you. And they’ll remember you. How many more changes of clothes you got? Hair and clothes?”

Maya faked grabbing the cellphone and adding her voice to the conversation. “What do you need to do?”

“These microphones,” Degrev opened his black leather jacket. The front inside pocket held a line of mismatched pens. “Microphones and transmitters built into these markers. I got to place them. I need you to distract them long enough for me to open and close the doors to the trucks, I’ve got to -- --”

“The windows are open. I’ll put them inside.”

“Can you see all the windows?”

“All the windows are open, I’ll walk between the trucks. I’ll do it.”

Degrev keyed the cellphone. “Redcard, testing.”

“I’m hearing you ---“

Inside the band van, Asad listened to voices and sounds as he spoke into his cellphone. Through the monitors, Maya sketched her placing of the microphones:

“ between the trucks, I go to the shoot, I look around, I go off that other way. They won’t even see my face. Just my hair. My coat.”

Floyd laughed. In the front passenger seat, he hit chords from an early 1980’s rock song --- with altered lyrics. “Her tight pants. Her fine body. That’s what they’ll see, myyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy Ma - My - Ya, myyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy Ma - My - Ya.”

Salazar hit the sheet metal of the van to add a back beat --- Asad shouted them down:

Asad: “Quiet! I got to hear this! Chech-man, you hear the clowns?”

Floyd: “Clowns! That’s us! Clowns of the Jihad!”

That's the new name of the band!"

Degrev spoke through the monitors. "I hear those fools. We still got a taxi waiting?"

Floyd glanced in the rear view mirror and shouted out. "Still there waiting for ---" Floyd chorded 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' and dropped his voice to a false bass. "Clowns of the Jihad" His voice trailed off in a tremolo. "Clowns of the Jihad, Snakeman! What can I sing after that? Give me a line."

Salazar: "Jackals of the Jihad, killing the Sa - ou - dis!"

Degrev: "Shut him up!"

Asad: "Quiet!" Flipping through switches, he confirmed circuits. One, then two, then a third L E D lit. Three other points of light -- red, yellow, blue with three color coded serial numbers -- pulsed on a flat panel.

"I've got three mikes on your voice and all of three the others, the three stars in the sky."

"Okay, we do it."

"Jihadiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis in the skies with diamonds" Floyd leaned between the seats to flash his manic grin to Asad, his tanned face, his hair spiked with gel, the strange 50's sunglasses a green mask in the lights of the LED display. The glass jewels in the sunglasses flashed with the blinking LEDs.

Asad screamed and laughed. "I can't take this, he's got those sunglasses on, I can't take it, I'm locked in box with clowns, I can't take it, no more."

Floyd changed the chording, sang a lonesome line. "I'm a rhinestone ... jihadi"

"Did you actually give those wacked out sunglasses to Floyd?" Degrev clicked off his phone, spoke to the felt pens in his pocket. "He looks like a rodeo tinkerbelle."

"I found them in Romania. Give me ---" Maya

took the pens.

“Romania? Skyman sent you to Romania?”

“Classified --- it’s a story. I’ll tell you later. I go straight through, one each into the pickups ---“

“You took all three.”

“I’m going to go past those Arabs. Touch close. This is Morocco. Fifty-fifty chance they’ll grab me, kiss my hand, say that plane is theirs and invite me for a flight to the casbah. I was grabbed three different times inside the airport. If I can, you want me to put one in their pocket? Maybe I can.”

“If they do grab you, don’t call out. I won’t be here. I’ll meet you at the hanger door. Where we were this morning. There --“ He glanced to the far corner of the hanger. “Or I’ll call you on your cellphone. Whatever happens, you won’t see me. Get away from them, keep their eyes in that direction. Not this way.”

“I’ve been here before, I don’t need help to get away from a Moroccan Romeo”

Degrev took three steps with Maya, then dropped to one knee at the bumper of a pickup. Maya continued. As her heels clicked away, Degrev reached under the front bumper of the pickup. His fingers found slick, cold metal. He stripped the foil off one side off what appeared to be a candy bar -- to expose the adhesive on the transmitter. As he pushed the mass of adhesive and electronics against to the metal, he heard:

“You! What are you doing in our truck?”

“This is your truck?” Maya asked. Degrev heard her Damascus boots scuff asphalt as she turned away from the pickup. Shoes rushed to her -- only one man.

Degrev listened as the man called back to the others. He understood the Arab telling the others she had reached into the truck. What was in the truck for the woman to steal?

"ما هو هناك في شاحنة لسرقة؟"

"This is your truck?"

"لا شيء."

"لا تجعل مشكلة مع النساء."

"لا يوجد شيء في الشاحنة."

"Why were you in our truck?"

"This is your truck? Sorry. Let go of me."

In the van, Floyd put down the Stratocaster. He signaled Salazar. As Salazar reached for the slide handle of the sidedoor, Asad shouted over the monitor voices:

"Stop! She'll deal with it."

An accented voice continued: "Yes, that is our truck. Why were you in our truck?"

"Let go of me."

Asad: "She can deal with it --"

The sound of the conversation changed. Metal slid over cloth, cloth rustled, the volume of the voices dropped.

"I thought this was one of our trucks. We always have --"

"Why were you in our truck?"

Asad: "She put a microphone --"

"Toilet paper. We always keep toilet paper in our trucks."

Asad laughed, switched on a recorder: "She put a microphone on him. She did it."

"Oh, anisa. I am so sorry. Anisa, please accept my apology. A misunderstanding."

Asad translated: "Anisa. That's Egyptian for young lady."

Floyd and Salazar laughed, beat the van with their hands.

Asad: "She's not out of it yet."

"I apologize. Can I offer you Kleenex? I am sorry

for misunderstanding. I will find for you Kleenex.”

“No, thank you. I will ask someone else.”

Maya stood face to face with the Egyptian. His hair styled, his beard close cut, he attempted to charm her even as he gripped her arm in his hands. He wore an expensive leather jacket, gold cufflinks flashed at his wrists as he struggled to hold her left hand. Her right arm remained free, outstretched away from him.

“I will find for you. I introduce myself, I am Suyuti --“

“Let go of me.”

“I apologize. Misunderstanding. Forgive me. But please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Suyuti. I am one of the sponsors. I travel here many times. Do you travel here many times? Please tell me of your time in Morocco --“

“Let go of me.”

“Perhaps I can have you arrested. Then we will talk. Other place. Your place or mine?” Suyuti glanced to the other men.

"ويريد من المرأة."

The Moroccan plainclothesman shook his head, no.

"وهناك امرأة أخرى في العالم. نحن نعمل هذه الليلة. والحدز. ويجب علينا توخي الحدز. ونحن لا نعرف من قتل ياسين"

In a smooth circular sweep, Maya brought her right hand up and past his hands, the rising blade of her right hand breaking his grip on her arm as she simultaneously stepped away from him. Her head whipped in a quick glance to check behind her, then she returned her eyes to him as she continued backwards and away from him. The speed and shock of the move silenced Suyuti for a moment, then he called out to her:

“You do not forgive me. I apologize. Perhaps another time. I travel here many times. You are so

beautiful!"

In the van, Asad translated: "Leave the woman alone ... we are working. And careful. We do not know who killed ... Yasiim."

"Was that the name of the Paki in Khartoom?" Floyd asked.

"Quiet!"

Maya continued to the production crew. Another shout stopped her:

"أين هو هذا الرجل؟ كان هناك رجل معها."

A Moroccan crossed the asphalt to the pickup trucks.

"رأيت فيه الرجل الذي معها. وسوف ننظر في الشاحنات."

Asad translated: "He saw Degrev. He's checking the trucks."

In the van, they heard the voice of Suyuti:

"أريد هذه المرأة. وأنا أستمتع بها وأنا انتظر الطائرة."

"He wants her. He wants ... her while he waits for the plane. He said plane."

"هناك نساء أخريات. الآن نذهب."

"أقول ان علينا الذهاب. أنا أمر. تذكر ذلك."

"تذكر فقدنا ياسين."

"وتذكر أن عاهرة الفرنسية."

Asad spoke to the others: "She did it. She put a microphone on that shit. They said they lost a man. Someone killed a man. They raped or killed a woman. And the loudmouth is going on a plane."

"What are they saying?" Floyd asked.

"They're talking trash"

"Talking trash about Maya? Losers, you now have a personal problem with me."

"Quiet! He said, 'flight and Marrakech.'" Asad touched the playback button of the digital recorder, listened, backed the timeline another second, listened again.

"... وعندما يتوجه الى مراكش."

"He said '... after I fly to Marrakech.' That's where he's going. She got it. We know what's going on."

From darkness, Degrev watched the plainclothesman pace around the black pickup trucks. The Moroccan returned to the group. Maya talked with a woman working with a video crew. A moment later, the plainclothesmen and the Egyptians went to the trucks. Each truck carried only two Suzuki crates -- only four in total.

Degrev stepped through the staff entrance to the hanger, keyed his cellphone as his eyes scanned the interior of the hanger, the work benches, the dismantled engines, the flat bed carts of tools and parts. No Suzuki crate. Technicians glanced to the foreigner in the black jacket and slacks, pointed to the open hanger doors.

"Motor cycles, there --"

The woman with the video crew passed Maya a packet of tissues. Maya spoke another moment with the woman, walked away. A voice called out from the Egyptians and Moroccan plainclothesmen at the trucks, she continued to Degrev. Degrev turned his back to the Egyptians as he met her. Degrev and Maya stood in the center of the hanger, beyond the hearing of the technicians at the workbenches, many steps from the camera teams working with the motorcycles racers and models.

“You see crate number five?” Degrev asked her. “It would look exactly like those four in the trucks.”

“The Egyptians and the men with the rifles, they’re leaving.”

“I’m calling the band. You see crate number five?”

“No. On the plane? Could it still be on the plane?”

“The plane’s booked for return to Khartoum.”

Degrev spoke into the phone. “Confirming the shipment. Boxes one through four in motion. Red Card, get behind the wheel. Put the phone on the audio system, I got instructions ---“

In the band van, Floyd checked the rear view mirror. The taxi remained several parked rows away, one man asleep, the other watching the white rental van. Asad plugged a cord into his cellphone.

Degrev spoke through the monitors. “Red Card, watch the exit from the airfield. Two black Mitsubishi trucks. With the boxes. Cowboy, Salazar -- fake it. Again. Away from the airport doors. You two go out wide. Fake our friends away from the van and away from the terminal. Then Salazar, you change your look and come into the terminal. We got to talk. Man, if they’re scanning these phones, this is for nothing“

Maya spoke through the monitor. “Cuando ustedes están afuera, muy lejos, si los otros están siguiendo, ustedes necesitarán perder ellos, pues Vacaro, usted llegará adentro el aero puerto. Hablar con el Chechen. Me entiende?”

Degrev returned: “I don’t want our friends seeing you and I can’t talk anymore on this phone and are they moving? Get them out and moving!”

In the van, Salazar concealed a levi jacket in a plastic bag. He put up the hood of his Paris jazz sweatshirt to hide his hair and features. Floyd

scrambled out the door and ran in the direction of the highway. Salazar angled through the parking lot to the hotel buses. Asad leaned across the front seat of the van to watch the taxi as he spoke into the cellphone:

“The taxi drivers are out. They’re splitting, they’re following. They’re out there. Salazar, you ready?”

“Like a snake. Como culebra de arco iris ... como ... chameleon.”

Across the parking lot, Salazar dodged behind a bus. Taking the levi jacket from the plastic bag, he folded down the hood of his purple sweatshirt, then slipped his the jacket over the sweatshirt. “ Cold! Man, let’s get this done” He rolled a plastic market bag into a wad.

With his sharp profile and dark hair, he looked like an Arab as he followed the sidewalk to the entry of the terminal.

Veering between two shops, Floyd pulled a black sweatshirt from under his cowboy shirt. The red and white shirt disappeared under the black sweatshirt. With the hood over his blond hair, Floyd rounded his shoulders, put his hands in his pockets, and shuffled through the blowing trash at the back of the shops.

Ghassan Al-Hamza watched the antics of the Americans and the Moroccans from his van opposite the terminal. Throughout the afternoon, the Americans in the white van had waited while the blonde woman entered the terminal from time to time, the Moroccans had watched -- until the cellphone calls told one American to watch for the trucks and the others to lure the Moroccans out of their taxi.

The Americans waited and watched for an incoming flight. The Moroccans watched the Americans.

And the inexperienced Moroccans had again

followed the Americans in their distraction. Hundreds of officers in the Direccion General of the Kingdom of Morocco -- and the local commander had assigned only four men to watch the Americans. Two men remained at the hotel, two in the parking lot watched the van.

The Moroccans did not recognize the blond named Maya and the American named 'The Chechen.' The Americans had deceived the Moroccan surveillance.

Of course the Moroccans suffered murders, bombings, kidnappings in their nation -- their intelligence services could not see the obvious.

If the Moroccans also monitored the cell-phones, perhaps they had understood the language spoken by Maya. Perhaps not. He had recorded all the cell-phone exchanges -- he would forward the exchanges to his office in Meeza, the staff would translate the message.

Al-Hamza could not follow the Americans everywhere today, the air flight of his back-up personnel would not arrive in Ourzazate until the next morning. Until then, he would watch the airport, another man the hotel, a third would rest at the shop while the electronics pulsed the position of the American van.

Not my country, Al-Hamza repeated to himself. He only needed to observe the Americans, take photos, and note their routine. For the files in Meeza.

The Moroccans, the Americans. All amateurs.
Tomorrow, the study would begin.

Inside the terminal, Degrev and Maya cut through the waiting passengers. They scanned the lines for Salazar. At the opposite end of the counters, Salazar pushed through a group of teenagers, his foot kicked a laptop case, a teenager shouted at Salazar, Degrev signaled Salazar to the glass and plastic of a duty free shop. Degrev and Maya went into the shop,

looked through the glass shelves of perfumes to watch the terminal entry.

In seconds, Salazar assumed a different image. He took off the levi jacket, rolled it, then slipped it into the market bag. He slipped off the purple sweatshirt, jammed it in the bag. Now he wore his tight levis and a white long-sleeved shirt with the silkscreened image of a surfer on a wave. Walking with the duty free bag in his hands, he looked like one of the tourists. He went to Degrev and Maya. "Only four?"

Degrev: "And we didn't see number five in the hanger. And the one with a G P tag went in the trucks."

"But you got the tags on the trucks?"

"In place."

"On clean metal or plastic?"

"Clean metal. Those trucks are new. New custom offroad Mitsubishi's."

"The plane brought in trucks?"

"Not the plane --"

Maya told them: "Moroccan dealer tags in the windshields. Paper tags. I tried to take one off. That's when he saw me reaching into the truck."

Degrev: "You what?"

"I saw the paper registration slip. Taped inside the windshield. If I'd gotten it, you'd know who supplied the trucks to move the missiles. Maybe where they'd take the missiles."

Degrev: "Don't do that. Don't take chances like that."

Salazar laughed: "¡Como ladron! Like a thief. Like with the folder in the taxi. If we take those missiles, do we get to keep the trucks?"

Degrev: "Go out there. The trucks will be going out the gate. Get the van up the road, lose the follow car. We'll follow the trucks. Then we'll alternate on the follow through the town. Go." He flipped open his rented Nokia cell-phone. "Red Card. Black trucks?"

In the van, Arabic voices and laughter came from the monitors. Asad tried to understand the different dialects as he watched the parking lot and terminal. Now questions came from Degrev.

“Not yet.”

“You got signals from the tags?”

“Can’t check. Cowboy and the Snake are not back, I’m up front --” He listened to the voices and noise, he watched the distant gates of the airfield, he checked the passenger-side mirror. Leaning across the seat, he got the correct angle -- the white Mercedes remained empty, he did not see the men in the parking lot. “--- I’m looking for the Snake.”

Degrev: “Don’t wait. Start it, loop around. Snakeman’s coming out the front, pick him up, pick up the others, get out of there. We’ll be on the trucks in the rented car.”

Moving through the luggage and passengers, Degrev pulled Maya with one hand, straight-armed a taxi-driver with the other, the man falling back against his Fiat. The taxi driver cursed Degrev and Maya as they rushed into traffic, then Maya ran beside Degrev. Headlights approached, they cleared the traffic lane and zigzagged through a row of parked cars to their white Fiat. Maya already had the keys in her hand, she whipped the doors open, started the car. Degrev spoke into the Nokia as Maya accelerated backwards.

“Redcard. The gate, did you see? A white truck, then the two black trucks? No one checked the black trucks. They’re coming out --“

Asad: “I’m circling.”

“I saw gate open before they got there, they glided out, did not stop.”

Maya sped backwards through parked cars and

lanes in a smooth S-curve, ending with jerked stop, then she accelerated past oncoming headlights and whipped the Fiat into traffic.

Degrev clicked off the Nokia. "Where'd you learn to drive like that?"

"Damascus. One of the trucks is behind us."

"Who's driving?"

"Back there, they all saw me --" Bracing the steering wheel with her knee, Maya pulled her hair back, looped a band over the hair, then shrugged out of her leather jacket. "Cold. Maybe they won't recognize me if go to hejab. Reach there, unfold it, I've got to steer --" She whipped the Fiat into the opposite lane, accelerated past a hotel van. "I think there's another truck up there a few cars. Put it over my head, the hejab goes over "

Watching the taillights in front of the car, Degrev slipped the black hood of the head covering over Maya. She shrieked:

"Opening in front, I can't see!" And taking her hands off the steering wheel, she turned the hejab to frame her face in the oval. She straightened the sides, then whipped the car back into the lane. "Now give me the abeya, let me put it over my shoulders -- quick change! From the shoulders up, I'm a different culture. They won't know I'm the blonde they saw at the airport."

"I am amazed." Degrev keyed the Nokia. "Red Card! You in motion? Red Card!"

Headlights illuminated dust swirling around the van, cars and buses passing the van at the side of the road as Salazar took the driver's seat and Asad retook his position at the rack of electronics. Salazar threw the van into gear and accelerated from the gravel.

Degrev spoke through the monitor: "Red Card! You in motion? Red Card!"

The cellphone swung on the cable, Asad grabbed the phone and reported: "We got out of there, they came late. I pulled over to let the Snakeman drive. They passed us. I've got audio from the trucks and" He pressed a keyboard function. Points of light with codes appeared on the screen. "Got signals. We won't lose them. Got GP's. Two G P's on the same truck, the third G P a distance back. And three audios. We got audios and positions."

"Did you see the third truck?"

"White. I saw a government logo on the side. Maybe police? Maybe army?"

"Whatever. They've got Kalashnikovs."

Traffic slowed to a stop at the intersection with the highway. Beyond the brakelights of other vehicles, Degrev saw the black Mitsubishi pickup turn right.

"Uplink and text message the Skyman or whoever's working the satellite that we're on it --- black truck number one turning. What direction is that, for what city?"

"Straight west for a distance, then it goes north-west to the mountains," Maya told him.

"What city?"

"Marrakech. But that's hours and hours by highway. Other side of the mountains. A world of desert between here and there."

"Red Card. We're going straight west. The truck on the screen?"

As the band van slowed to a stop in a line of traffic, a black Mitsubishi pickup accelerated past. Two crates marked SUZUKI rocked in the back as the pickup swerved from the left lane through a wide right turn.

"That truck is mine." Salazar eased back from the taillights, glanced to the rear-view mirror for cars

following. "The boxes go to the Skyman or the Marines or Washington, whoever pays us, but I take that truck. Look at how that fool's driving my truck."

"Drives like you ---"

The taillights of the pickup diminished into the west as Salazar waited to turn. Degrev spoke over the monitor:

"Where is it? Where is that second truck?"

Asad: "Coming up behind you at high speed. Be advised of erratic driving. Like an Egyptian Or a Mexican. Uplinking to the Skyman"

In the falling rain, a wreck jammed the inbound lanes of Pennsylvania Avenue. Rain streaked the tinted windows of the Suburban limo. Del Cielo saw lines of stopped cars and the flashing lights of an ambulance. The driver glanced back to the rear seat:

"Only a delay of a few minutes, sir. I am calling ahead to Professor Hayes and Mr. Morgan."

Del Cielo reached out the side window of the Suburban, slapped the antenna panel flat on the sheet metal of the roof. Magnets held the panel in place. The cable went the Iridium, then to his PowerBook. Rain splattered the interior of the Suburban as he powered up the window.

Outside the window, a tourist bus idled. VISIT THE CAPITOL. Above the sign, faces looked down at Del Cielo keying the PowerBook.

Text from Ouarzazate appeared on the screen of the PowerBook. Encoded, then transmitted in a burst of electronic noise, the text mode minimized the risk of interception and decoding.

"Only four boxes seen. Two GP tags from Sudan confirmed. Two trucks with four boxes. A third truck as escort. Three foreign Arab conspirators / Egyptian? Two or more Moroccans with AK-47s. Civilian clothing. Moroccan police?"

Military? Total of five? Six? Enemy. Driving west on highway to mountains. We follow in truck and rented car. Two G P tags and three audio placed on trucks. Following and listening. Destination unknown. They talked flight to Marrakech.”

Slow with fatigue, Del Cielo two-fingered the information from Sudan: “Jazz operative secure. Now in flight to join the band.”

Keys unlocked an empty room in the Old Executive Office Building. Morgan switched on the lights, set a laptop computer on the desk. The past occupant had stripped the office of all personal possessions and departmental equipment. Only the desk, chairs, and the empty bookshelves remained. Morgan pulled two chairs to the desk.

“I didn’t want to make an accusation until I had proof. And this is it. Look.”

“What is this exactly?” Alexander glanced at the blank walls, he checked his PDA/cellphone. “We must meet with Colonel Del Cielo very soon.”

Morgan keyed through screens of satellite images. The laptop screen blurred with images of the Red Sea, the deserts of Sudan, the convoluted topography of North Africa.

Icons appeared over the geography. In three area, the icons clustered. Block letters indicated: Al Kasaad, Khartoum, Ouarzazate.

“Look at this” Morgan moved a pointer over the icons. He turned the screen to Alexander. As the arrow-point touched an icon, alpha-numeric codes appeared next to the icon.

“I didn’t tell you this when we talked after the video conference. We had a man in the Al-Qaeda gang. The gang moving the missiles through Kartoum. Months of scheming to get that man into the gang.

And two nights ago, he disappeared in a fire at a warehouse. Report from Khartoum, a huge fire, unknown number of dead. But we know our man is dead.”

Morgan touched a function key, the national lines of Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco appeared. He typed another key. The screen flashed to a satellite image of the District of Columbia -- with an icon.

“Minutes ago. Transmission from Morocco, then a transmission from Washington, D.C. From the truck I sent to Edwards to chauffeur the colonel into town. My driver called, he told me the colonel’s working with an Iridium and a laptop. He seems to have uplinked on the way over here. Look at the numbers, the signatures match. If I had any doubts, now I don’t. The transmissions track the colonel from Khartoum, to Ouarzazate, now here.”

Morgan pointed to a pattern of icons in Sudan. “Al Kasaad, near the Al-Qaeda airfield, with encoded Thuraya transmissions and the encoded uplinks we believe to be from a computer ---“

Alexander: “And what does this mean? You lost a man? And all these uplinks?”

“Then Khartoum. Many uplinks and Thurayas here, simultaneous with the fire, then we lost our man. We haven’t succeeded in breaking their encryption, we can’t take this over to Fort Meade to read the intercepts, we don’t want them in this, but the transmission now confirms it all.

“Look. Same digital signatures on the Thurayas, same signatures on the computers. Del Cielo’s running his losers, his losers were there when our man and his facility got destroyed. And they were in real time contact with that colonel. It’s a fact. Proven.”

Alexander: “You believe they destroyed the warehouse and your man died in the fire?”

“The uplinks actually circled the warehouse. Real

time communications with that Colonel Del Cielo.”

Alexander shook his head. “This must stop. These conflicts in the field are not good. Non-communication, mistakes, friendly fire loses ... We need to co-ordinate all these scattered elements.”

“We are co-ordinated.” Morgan pointed to the center of his chest. “We are counting cadence. But this Del Cielo is skipping through the countries with his band of losers and they blunder into one of my projects and they kill my man. Months to place a man in that gang. And now that man is dead. I don't have that man watching the missiles. Those losers killed him.”

“How do you know that?”

“The uplinks circle the warehouse. Real time. And I know their history. Their assignments, in Iraq. They are in this for the money and if our man threatened their money, they would kill him. That's why they're out of the Marines, they disregard procedures, they won't follow orders ----“

“Tell them to get out. Get out, stay out. It's your project.”

“We can't. They killed our man. Now we don't have anyone else in the desert. They are the only American eyes on.”

“But you've got tracking units on the missiles? Transmitters?”

“We lost our tracking units on the missiles in Iraq. We've got a radio frequency tracker on the batteries. A pulse unit. Like Del Cielo's got on the launch tubes. But we don't have tracker units on the missiles.”

“Then they've got missiles --- “

“Del Cielo says. Del Cielo says missiles without batteries. They cannot aim and fire the missiles without the batteries. And we've got pulse units on the batteries.”

“How many missiles?”

“Ten. Maybe.”

“Not fifteen? The Colonel believed as many as fifteen.”

“In Iraq, they bought fourteen. But we think they tested the missiles at random. That was their routine. They would not pay, they would not release the criminal who delivered the missiles until they tested the missiles. My informant in Anbar said they shot four. The other ten got shipped out.”

“What? They bought fourteen, they shot four, they shipped out ten to attack the United States? Morgan, allow me to summarize this situation as others might. As follows. Your people sold Al-Qaeda terrorists fourteen fully-functional surface to air missiles. To test the missiles, they fired four missiles at coalition aircraft. Did they hit coalition aircraft? Did the terrorists kill Americans? And they exported the remaining ten missiles for attacks here, in the United States. To kill thousands of Americans. To shut down air travel in the United States and the world. Is that the story we will hear on the six o'clock news?”

“No, sir. That’s not correct. A gang of Iraqi criminals who had looted an armory were selling missiles to an Al-Qaeda gang. We got that information from one of the criminals. That man allowed us to place transmitters in the next load of missiles. That would have allowed us to follow the missiles wherever the missiles went. And hit them with precision weapons. But the gang took the missiles out of the shipping cases. They shot some of the missiles in Iraq. And they sent other missiles out of Iraq.”

Alexander: “After the missiles down a few airliners, perhaps a few thousand dead Americans, do you want to explain what went wrong with your project to a Senate committee?”

Morgan: “No, sir. Those missiles will not be used against Americans. Will not happen. The missiles are not functional without the batteries. We’ve

got a radio-frequency tracker on the batteries. Iraq, Sudan, Morocco. We are following them. When the missiles get to Tangier, when the gang mates up the missiles with the batteries, we hit the gang. We destroy them.”

Alexander: “If the missiles are not functional without the batteries, how did they use the missiles in Iraq?”

Morgan: “They may have had access to other batteries. That’s Iraq, for Christ’s sake. Every piece of military junk in the world is in Iraq. Morocco isn’t like Iraq.”

Alexander: “Do you have anyone inside the terrorist cell in Morocco? If the cell had access to alternative batteries, would you know it?”

Morgan: “They killed that man. Our man inside of Al Qaeda. The losers working for Del Cielo killed that man.”

Alexander: “That was your only man inside the cell?”

Morgan: “Only man in Sudan. Who would have accompanied the missiles to Morocco. And reported from inside the gang. Del Cielo’s losers killed him. But we’ve still got sources in Iraq, we’ve got overhead electronic surveillance in Iraq, Sudan, and Morocco, we’ve got the tracking on the batteries, and we’ve got operatives waiting in Tangier ---“

Alexander: “But no eyes on the missiles. And you don’t know if they can get launch batteries.”

Morgan: “Those losers killed that man.”

Alexander: “Does Feith know every detail of this mis-adventure?”

Morgan: “No. Of course not.”

Alexander: “You want to explain this to the Defense Secretary? To investigators?”

Morgan: “No, no, no, no. And I don’t want to explain it to Del Cielo. For now, I want to keep Del Cielo’s people in there. They are out-of-control losers.

But out there in the desert, they're the only eyes we've got."

Alexander: "Regardless, we go ahead with this meeting, we tell him he's getting the Special Operations. You must retake those missiles."

Morgan: "Exactly. Tell him that."

Alexander: "Is that not what will actually happen?"

Morgan: "We're not doing it as he wants. We're not risking a slip-up. When the missiles make it to Tangiers, we hit the gang, we seize the missiles there, immediately, in the city. The missiles and the Al-Qaeda gang. We take them all. The force is pre-positioned in Tangiers."

Alexander: "If you've got a force pre-positioned, why not take them now?"

Morgan: "Ouarzazate, six hundred kilometers from the coast to the missiles. And I've got no helicopters, no gunships, no refueling. And I can't risk cooperation with a Muslim government. Tangier, the terrorist compound in Tangier is maybe a kilometer from the water. Tangier. That's where we take the missiles."

Alexander: "Why not tell Colonel Del Cielo that?"

Morgan: "I've been on this case two months, day and night. He fell into it three days ago. This is my project. That colonel and his band of losers don't get another chance to screw up my project."

Alexander: "Does this put his group at any risk?"

Morgan: "Those losers? They won't make it to Tangier."