

## Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Master Sergeant John Cooper wondered if he'd live to see another sunset.

"You're sure this will work, Frank?" he asked the team's dark-haired explosives expert, pushing the negative thought from his mind.

"What I'm sure of, Coop, is that over one hundred children will be forcibly converted into particulate matter in less than an hour if we don't try this. That is, unless someone has a better idea."

John and Sergeant First Class Frank Baldwin both looked across the hood of their Humvee at their commander, waiting to see if he did indeed have a better idea.

Major Louis Williams stared past the two soldiers at the rusty swing set between him and the school compound. His face showed little emotion, except for a firmly clenched jaw. He said nothing for a full twenty seconds.

John's eyebrows shot up. "Well, sir?"

Williams picked up his Motorola radio and growled into it, "What have you got, Dan?"

Dan Daly, the team's sniper, answered from his observation point on the roof of an apartment building across the street from the school complex. "The leader hasn't moved. I can't tell for sure, but it looks like the sick kid they released this morning was telling the truth about the setup inside."

John looked at his watch. *Forty-seven minutes.* "If we're going to try Frank's plan, we'd better make it quick."

Major Williams turned to Frank. "Explain this thing to me again." He gestured to the cylindrical metal object lying on the hood of the Humvee. "It looks like an artillery shell casing."

Frank sighed, then spoke as one would to a slow child. "It's a miniature e-bomb, sir. Basically, it's a small Flux Compression Generator, or FCG, which is a copper tube packed with explosives, surrounded by a coil of heavy copper wire. The wire is charged with electricity just before the explosive is detonated, which creates a ramping pulse of electrical current equivalent to maybe ten or twenty bolts of lightning. That should be enough of an EMP to inhibit the use of the enemy's detonators."

Major Williams stared at him. "You're speaking English, Baldwin. I know you are. It's just not the same English I speak."

John bit back a grin. Granted Frank drove him nuts sometimes with his smarter-than-thou routine, but it had to be hard being a genius.

"I think what he's trying to say is, this thing will create an energy pulse that will toast the bad guys' toys without damaging the building or the schoolchildren. The sick kid said that he saw explosives duct taped to the concrete pillars and wall supports on the first floor, with wires running to a mat the terrorists brought in with them. It looks like the floor mat out of a car, but it has a plate of sheet metal on it. The terrorists are taking turns standing on the plate, never stepping off of it."

The major nodded. "So that must be the detonator. And these yahoos are trying to foil our snipers by setting it **up** so if they get knocked down, the whole place blows. And you're saying this e-bomb will disable their explosives?"

"Not the bombs, sir. Just the circuitry in the detonators."

“What if they have backup methods in place?”

“We have to assume that they do,” Frank said. “But this thing will instantly render everything electronic inoperative. Batteries will malfunction, wires will melt, lightbulbs will explode. The only way they could light their demo after the e-bomb goes off is with a manual nonelectric detonator, like a time fuse. Which is why we’ll need to assault the building immediately once the FCG detonates.”

“And be sure to use a manual detonator for our own breach,” John said.

The major rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. “Have you tested this device?”

John looked at Frank, whose smarts appeared to fail him for a moment as he hesitated, then cleared his throat. “Well, not exactly, sir. The Army successfully used several larger devices like this on bases around Iraq during the initial invasion in 2003. This one is just...um...smaller.”

The major, an ex-linebacker from Auburn University, picked up the device and turned it over in his hands like a football. “Where did you get it, Frank?”

He cleared his throat again. “I built it.”

Williams nearly fumbled the thing. “You *what*?”

John almost laughed at the major’s expression. Frank was an acquired taste, always having a newer and better way of doing things. Sometimes he was even right.

“Well, I assembled it, anyway.” Frank stared at the bomb like a man might gaze upon a beautiful woman. “I used the first stage FCG and capacitors from a low-frequency Mark-eighty-four e-bomb the Air Force...um...wasn’t using.”

The major slapped his Kevlar-helmeted forehead. “I’m going to get fired.”

John spoke up. “He didn’t steal it, sir. It fell off a forklift at the ammo supply point at Bragg back in January, and they were going to destroy it as potentially damaged. Frank talked them into letting us have it. He’s carried it with him on our last two deployments, waiting for an opportunity to try it out.”

Williams spat on the ground. “Well, I don’t see what other choice we have. If we go in hot and one of the terrorists falls off of his magic carpet, we lose. They’ve promised to blow the place unless all French and UN peacekeepers leave the country, which ain’t gonna happen.” He checked his watch. “So in forty-four minutes, we lose. Unless…”

He set the cylinder back on the vehicle’s hood and looked toward the high cement wall surrounding the school building. “It looks like we’re fourth down and fifteen and plum out of options. But how do you propose getting the e-bomb inside the building?”

“Oh, we don’t need to, sir,” Frank said. “That’s what so great about it. It can be detonated anywhere within a hundred meters of the school.” He hesitated for a moment. “Which reminds me. There might be a few, er, *side effects*.”

The major’s gaze narrowed. “Like what?”

John bit the inside of his cheek to keep that smile contained.

“Like anything electronic in the area will also be cooked,” Frank said.

“Anything?”

“Pretty much.”

Williams didn’t immediately answer, and John leaned against the Humvee, scanning the ramshackle neighborhood that surrounded the school. This part of Abidjan was predominantly Christian, but lately Muslim rebels from the north had been sowing terror here. As if these people’s poverty wasn’t miserable enough.

John'd been all over the world in his years in the Special Forces, and except for the language on the road signs and business signs, this could be any third-world city. They all shared a certain sense of despair, as if the people who labored to construct these rickety dwellings started out with good intentions but at some point were simply overwhelmed by the Law of Entropy and gave up.

The more places like this John visited, the more he appreciated the hopefulness he felt when he was back home. America was the land of optimism, whether its people realized it or not.

He studied the two-story cinderblock homes lining the trash-strewn street in front of the school. Most had corrugated metal roofs and no glass in their windows. Concrete walls around some dwellings showed graffiti in French and Arabic, as well as numerous pockmarks from previous violence.

The French peacekeepers were holding all civilians behind barricades they had set up two blocks away. How many of those people lived in these houses and had children in the school, their kids' lives in the hands of men willing to kill themselves to earn Allah's approval through martyrdom?

*How can You let kids be treated like this, God? They're so powerless. You're supposed to protect them, aren't You?*

The major nodded abruptly and reached for his radio. "I can handle a few burnt-out lightbulbs if we save the lives of a hundred elementary school kids."

Frank's smile was brilliant.

The major gestured toward the hardened troop transport vehicle the team had brought with them on the mission. "Frank, have the boys put anything that might get

wrecked in the back of the Cougar HEV transport over there. Radios, night-vision goggles—everything electronic. Have all other vehicles pull back far enough so their components won't get fried. We might end up buying new televisions for everyone in the neighborhood, but I'm not having the rest of our whiz-bang gear taken out if I can help it. John, keep one radio for yourself in case we have to abort."

Frank scooped up his e-bomb and trotted off toward the vehicles. The major turned back to the schematics of the school laid out over the hood of the Humvee.

"Okay, John. Get your breach team in position on the south wall. Once we blow that...er...thing, you'll need to hit the school quick before the bad guys figure out what's happened. If they realize we've killed their electronics, they just might resort to blowing this thing the old-fashioned way—if they don't shoot all the kids first, the rotten cowards!" He spoke the last two words with enough volume to be heard across the street.

*Cowards* was a good word. Grown people who went after kids were cowards. Bullies. What kind of worldview held that murdering a hundred innocent schoolchildren was the path to heaven, but touching a piece of bacon could get you damned eternally? John wasn't even sure he wanted to understand it.

On the other hand, there were people back in the States with similar philosophies—groups who believed that bombing abortion clinics scored them points with God, but owning a Rolling Stones CD was a ticket to hell. Go figure.

John didn't consider himself an expert on the Lord by any stretch, but something inside him knew that a vindictive and unjust God wasn't worth the title.

But those were questions for chaplains and clerics. At the moment, John had time for neither. If God wasn't going to keep kids and the other innocents of the world safe, he and his men would do it. He consulted his watch again.

"We've got fifteen minutes." He keyed the Motorola. "Dan, get ready. We're going for it."

## 2

Beirut, Lebanon

"Liz! She went back!"

Liz Fairchild looked up from her laptop and the interview she was transcribing to see Nabila standing in the doorway, a letter dangling from her shaking hand. "Who went back where?" she asked the family's housekeeper/cook.

"Iman. To the refugee camp."

Cold coiled about Liz's heart. "Are you sure?"

Nabila waved the letter. "My cousin Hanan has seen her, though she hasn't had a chance to talk to her."

The cold seeped throughout Liz's body, chilling her to the fingertips. It was barely eight o'clock, too early to hear such terrible news. "She'll probably be all right."

But neither of them believed it. Iman would certainly suffer. The only questions were how much and when.

Nabila read from the letter. "I worry about her. You know her mother and father. In their eyes Iman has shamed the family."

Liz didn't actually know Iman's parents as Nabila did, but she knew all about them.

"My aunt and uncle are so ardent, so passionate about the letter of Islamic law." Nabila's face was a study in concern and distress. "My aunt especially is fanatical. I fear her more than my uncle. He is more compassionate by nature, and he is a broken man over what happened to Iman. That his sons, the future of his family, would rape their younger sister and make her pregnant has shattered his heart. They sit in jail for their crime, and he is shamed. My aunt, on the other hand, is shamed that Iman got pregnant and had a child outside of marriage. She blames Iman, not the brothers."

Liz frowned. "I can't understand that thinking. Iman is the victim. She was only fourteen to the brothers seventeen and eighteen. She needs sympathy, not condemnation."

"You think like an American or a European, not a Palestinian raised in the camps."

Liz couldn't deny that. "Does Hanan specifically say she fears for Iman's life?"

Nabila shook her head. "Hanan has to be careful what she writes in case a letter is intercepted. No one, not even her husband, knows she writes me."

"Why do you think Iman went back? She was safe with your relatives in the Bekaa Valley. She could have stayed with them forever. Everyone told her over and over not to go back. She would be putting herself in danger."

Liz knew an honor killing was Nabila's main fear. The crime was not very common in Lebanon anymore, but sometimes in one of the crowded Palestinian camps, where there was essentially no civil law enforcement, terrible things happened in the name of Allah.

“You know the pull of home,” Nabila said. “Much as you love living in the United States, you keep coming back to Beirut.”

Liz nodded. She had been raised here from thirteen until she went to the States for college. Her parents, Drs. Charles and Annabelle Fairchild, still lived here and taught at the American University of Beirut. Her sister, Julie, had married a Lebanese and lived here, too.

“And I know how hard it is to stay away.” Nabila’s voice was low and harsh, full of regret over things she couldn’t change and deep in her heart wouldn’t change.

She had come from the same camp that her cousin Iman had returned to, and Nabila knew she could never go back. She, too, had dishonored her family when at eighteen she had walked away from her culture and hitched a ride to Beirut with only the dream of more. It was bad enough that she was getting an education at the American University of Beirut, but she also worked as housekeeper/cook for two American professors.

“Oh, Nabila!” Liz went to her and hugged her. Nabila had been with the Fairchilds for so many years that it was easy to forget she had lived seventeen hardscrabble years in the camp.

“But you left a difficult life, especially for a woman, to seek a better life and your dream of becoming a doctor. Iman was in such a good situation with people who loved her, and she’s gone back to virtual enslavement.” Or worse.

“In your eyes. In my eyes.” Nabila blinked and brushed futilely at the tears that ran down her cheeks. “I am so frightened for her.”

Liz grabbed some tissues from the box on her night table and handed them to Nabila. “When was the letter from Hanan written?”

Hanan was the only one from Nabila’s family who had kept contact with her after she left. When Hanan went to market in Sidon, she gave her letters to a merchant who sold produce in the souk, and he posted them for her, adding the cost of the stamps to her bill. When Nabila wrote back, the little man wrapped the letter in the papers about Hanan’s fruit and vegetables.

“The letter is two weeks old.”

“Yikes.” So much could have happened in two weeks. “I need to go see that she’s fine. Maybe I can talk her into returning to Nabatiya.”

Nabila’s face mirrored her relief. “I was hoping you would do that.”

“I can’t do anything else.” Liz Fairchild, would-be Fixer of the Universe. “Iman’s been stuck in my mind and heart ever since you arranged for me to interview her last month.” Liz saw the slight girl, swathed in black clothes and head covering, hugging herself as she talked about her despair.

“Who will ever marry me now?” she had asked, dark eyes stark. “I have brought shame upon myself, upon my family, shame so severe I can never recover. I am ruined.”

Liz wanted to cry. She leaned forward, note taking forgotten. “Iman, it wasn’t your fault.”

But the girl’s mother had told her it was. Her culture had told her she was impure, an abomination, a temptress who brought the rape upon herself.

Iman stared at the floor. “I feel everyone has cast me out. I am all alone,” she whispered.

That loneliness was why she had returned, Liz knew. Family ties, no matter how dysfunctional the family, called a siren's song almost impossible to resist, no matter the consequences of listening. Family was security, especially to a traumatized fifteen-year-old.

"I think she misses her baby, though she didn't tell me so." Liz slipped her feet into a pair of Reeboks and tied the laces. Walking around the litter-strewn streets of the refugee camp called for sturdy shoes. "And who knows how much of her despair is postpartum problems."

"There was no way she could have kept that baby girl."

"I agree, and at least some family now has a child they otherwise wouldn't."

Nabila's cell phone rang as Liz made certain her passport was in her purse. She'd need it at the checkpoints.

"Hanan!" Nabila said, shock in her voice.

Liz blinked. Hanan never called. Literally. It was too dangerous. The conversation was short, and Nabila groaned as she hit the disconnect.

"Hanan says my uncle has left the camp on business of some kind. He will be gone overnight. It is only Iman and my aunt and the younger daughter."

Liz nodded. She understood the danger all too well. She shoved a piece of paper at Nabila. "Directions once I get to the camp."

As Nabila wrote, Liz grabbed her car keys. "Tell my parents that I might not be back in time for dinner."

The road from Beirut to Sidon was good, and Liz drove as fast as she dared.

*Heavenly Father, help me get there in time. Please!*

The road from Sidon to the Sainiq camp was not as good, and she was forced to slow. She felt the clock ticking, and the sight of the checkpoint outside the camp ratcheted her tension. She rubbed at the base of her sternum, trying to relieve the sick feeling that grew stronger with each moment.

She slowed and held out her passport and journalist's credentials to the young Lebanese soldier who peered in her window. His gun was pointed to the ground, and that's the way she wanted it to stay. She tried to appear calm, to give no hint of the anxiety that drove her or the need she felt for speed.

"Why do you want to go in there?" the soldier asked in fractured English.

"I'm a writer. I'm writing a story about what it's like to be a Palestinian woman today," she answered in Arabic. *And today I'm interested in one small Palestinian.*

The soldier looked at her in surprise and switched to his own language. "An American who speaks Arabic?"

"I lived many years in Beirut. My parents live there still. So does my sister."

"But you now live in America?" His eyes were bright with curiosity.

"I do. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

"My cousin Habib lives in Thorndale, Pennsylvania. Do you know him?"

The question didn't surprise Liz. One of the first things a Lebanese asked when meeting someone was, "What village are you from?" To someone who lived in the small country of Lebanon, the size of the United States, even the size of Pennsylvania, was hard to grasp. "No, I'm afraid I don't know your cousin."

"He is handsome. You would like him. He has a pizza shop."

Liz smiled, though all she wanted to do was hit the accelerator and be gone. “If I ever go to Thorndale, Pennsylvania, I will stop at his shop and say hello to him.”

The young soldier looked pleased. He pointed to the camp. “You do not want to go in there. It is dangerous.”

“I know, but I do need to talk to the people who live there.”

“They don’t like Americans.”

Another soldier rushed out of the kiosk, shouting and pointing back toward Sidon. The young guard stepped back and frowned down the road.

Liz looked in her rearview mirror and saw three speeding cars, lights flashing on top, bearing down on the checkpoint.

“Go.” The young soldier held out her passport, making shooing motions with his hand. “Go!”

As the sound of sirens cut the air, Liz drove the last small distance into the camp, which was not really a camp but a small city. She wanted to pull over, let the speeding vehicles pass, and then follow them to their destination. Stumbling onto fresh news was about as good as it got for a reporter.

But she reined herself in. Today there was something—someone—more important than a scoop. She carefully followed the directions to Hanan’s house. She made two turns when she became aware that the speeding cars with the flashing lights and blaring sirens were roaring up behind her. The road was little more than a dirt lane with homes built closely on both sides, and she looked about for somewhere to get out of the way.

A horn blared loudly behind her, a bass to the tenor warblings of the sirens, just as she saw a house set back from the road a few feet. She pulled into a small strip of dirt that was essentially someone's front yard. It was just big enough for her dusty, black rental. She waited as the cars rocketed by, her own car swaying in the air currents of their passing.

She drove back onto the road, feeling somewhat claustrophobic from all the buildings set so closely to each other. There was literally no space between the structures. One house's west wall was the next house's east wall. Women and children stood in doorways to see the passing vehicles.

What did these women think of their lives, Liz wondered. Did they harbor the generations-old hatred for Israel, or did they see its futility? Did they meekly accept the fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law that said they were lesser beings than men, or did they think themselves of value, at least secretly even though they couldn't voice such heresy? Would they see Iman as the sinner and her brothers as the victims, or vice versa?

To her surprise and growing dismay, Liz found herself making the same turns as the speeding cars. It was like she was deliberately following them.

They couldn't be going where she was going. They just couldn't.

*Oh, God, please, no!*

She rounded the final corner as the official cars screeched to a halt, and men in uniform jumped out. They raced to a house, nearly pulling the screen door off as they rushed inside. The street was full of people, many of the women crying, most of the men looking pleased. She saw Hanan's home and counted one, two, three more.

It was the home the police and soldiers had entered.

That coil of cold wrapped its hoary arms about her again. Iman!

“What’s happened?” she asked the first man she came to. He looked at her, glanced quickly away, then without a word, joined three men standing near Hanan’s.

It wasn’t bad manners. In her distress she’d forgotten that a lone woman shouldn’t talk to a man. She approached a group of women. “What’s happened?”

They turned to her, their sad eyes suspicious in spite of the fact that she spoke Palestinian Arabic.

Liz tried again. “Is Hanan here?”

The women’s eyes darted to a young woman standing with two little girls hanging on her skirt. Liz approached her.

“Hanan, I’m Liz Fairchild.” She dropped her voice to little more than a whisper. “Nabila got your letter today.”

Hanan looked at her, dark eyes awash with tears. She was a pretty woman with a strong resemblance to Nabila. “I am afraid it is too late.”